

WILD WEST



A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES Etc. OF WESTERN LIFE.

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Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE PRAIRIE PEARL

OR, THE MYSTERY OF NO MAN'S RANCH.

By AN OLD SCOUT.



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YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE PRAIRIE PEARL

OR,

The Mystery of No Man's Ranch.

BY AN OLD SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

YOUNG WILD WEST MEETS THE PRAIRIE PEARL.

Crack!

The sharp report of a Winchester rifle rang out on the still morning air; then there came the sound of a heavy body falling, and the next instant a dashing young fellow attired in a buckskin hunting suit emerged from a clump of bushes and started toward a big oak tree.

He never stopped till he reached the foot of the tree, and then he stood looking at the quivering carcass of a huge mountain lion that had been perched on a limb of the tree in the act of springing upon a magnificent sorrel stallion that was grazing within a few feet of the trunk of the tree.

That one shot had cut short the life of the dangerous animal, and the horse had been saved from being torn and perhaps killed.

"Spitfire, old fellow, that was a close call you had," said the boy—for he could scarcely be called else. "If I had not got back just as I did that catamount would have made short work of you. Never mind, now!" and he rubbed the nose of the intelligent animal with one hand and patted his handsome arched neck with the other.

The boy was no other than Young Wild West, the famous young dead-shot of the West, who was commonly known as the Prince of the Saddle.

It was a cool day in the fall of the year, and Young Wild West had been searching for two hours to find his two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart.

They were making a trip on horseback from Roaring

Ranch to Cheyenne, and had completed about one-third of the distance when we find our hero in the act of saving his faithful steed from the fury of the mountain lion.

He had parted from his two companions about two hours before, they having branched out to the right and left in search of game, with the understanding that they were to meet on the bank of the Medicine Bow river about the middle of the afternoon.

As Young Wild West had proceeded in an almost direct course, he had covered the distance quicker than his companions could.

The river was less than a mile away, and when the boy had skinned the lion he rolled it up and tied it to the pommel of his saddle, where half a dozen pheasants hung in a bunch already fastened, and, mounting his horse, rode slowly toward the glimmering water that flowed snake-fashion over the prairie.

The boy and the horse made a true picture of Western life as they rode off.

Young Wild West had the form of an Apollo and his handsome face and flowing chestnut hair, together with the ease and grace with which he sat in the saddle, marked him as being far above the average young Westerner.

The horse he rode had been tamed by himself, and the animal was yet to be beaten in a race.

Young Wild West loved the sorrel stallion as much as human being could love a faithful and intelligent animal, and the steed understood and returned it in his own equine way.

With his rifle resting in the hollow of his left arm, he rode from the little island of trees and shrubbery that dotted the prairie just there and pursued his way over

the withered brown grass that had succumbed to the frosty nights and here and there barely covered the patches of green which seemed bound to show themselves.

Wild had given up all idea of hunting any more that day, and he was simply looking for a good place to camp on the bank of the river, for they had been on the go since early morning, and their horses needed rest, as well as themselves.

That was the main reason the boy had taken the direct course while his companions were supplying themselves with game.

When they came up they expected to find him waiting for them with the camp in ship-shape order and a fire blazing to make it look home-like.

It was shortly after three o'clock by the boy's watch when he found just the place he thought would answer their purpose for a camping ground.

It was in a tiny grove of cottonwoods on the left bank of the sluggish stream.

On the bank that sloped to the south Wild found plenty of grass that was still green, and he soon had his horse tied with a lariat, so he could nibble away at it, or rest, as he chose.

Then he started in to gather dry wood for a fire, and as there was plenty of it lying around, he soon accomplished this.

While he stood figuring on what he should do next, the sounds of approaching hoofs came to his ears.

As the sounds came from a direction contrary from that he expected his partners to come from, he was instantly all attention.

Running to the edge of the trees, he discerned a horse and rider heading straight for the clump of cottonwoods.

There was nothing so very remarkable in this, only that the rider was a female.

She could not have been a month over sixteen, and though she was some distance away, our hero could see that she was quite pretty and possessed a fine figure.

She rode the spirited bay horse she was on with no little skill, and Wild at once concluded that she was a true Western girl.

The girl saw him almost the instant he stepped from the trees, but she did not seem to be the least bit surprised.

"I wonder who she can be?" thought the boy. "She must have seen me from the distance. It seems rather strange to meet a girl here alone, with nothing but the broad prairie and the river and a few trees in sight. Well, I will soon learn, for here she comes like a shot."

The fair rider had put on a burst of speed, and a few seconds later she pulled up in front of Young Wild West.

"Hello, young fellow!" she called out rather familiarly. "What brings you around here?"

"I am traveling on horseback for Cheyenne," replied the boy, not a little amused at her rough-and-ready way. "Now, I might ask you what you are doing around here alone?"

"Me? Oh! I'm liable to be found anywhere in these parts. I live the most of my time on the prairie. I'm Rustling Nell, sometimes called the Prairie Pearl. Never heard of me?"

"No, I can't say I have. Do you live far from here?"

"See here, young fellow! It strikes me that you are getting quite impertinent, for a stranger. Who in the dickens are you, anyway?"

"I go by the name of Young Wild West."

"You do, hey? Well, I reckon I have heard of you. You're a sort of rustler, ain't you?"

"I don't know about that part of it. I am pretty well known throughout the West, and I don't believe there are many who have a hard word to say about me."

"So I've heard say. Well, now I guess I can answer your question. I do live around here. I live on my old man's ranch, which is located about four miles the other side of that ridge over there. I'm on my way to the store in Markdown, which is just beyond that timber strip the other side of the river. Now, I guess you know about enough of me. I just saw you come up to the cottonwoods here, and I thought I'd ride over and see what you looked like. Good day, Young Wild West. Just look out for yourself and don't get too close to No Man's Ranch, or the goblins will get you!"

Saying this, the girl wheeled her horse around and galloped away, leaving our hero about as much astonished as he had been in a long time.

"Rustling Nell, the Prairie Pearl, eh?" he mused. "Well, I must say that she appears to be the kind of girl who can take care of herself in times of danger. So there is a settlement not far from here, too? Well, I don't know but that we had better push on to it as soon as Charlie and Jim show up. We have had quite a lot of camping-out lately, and it might be an agreeable change to put up at a hotel for a night or two."

He put the match-box he had drawn from his pocket for the purpose of lighting a fire back, deciding to wait till his partners showed up, and then push on to the village of Markdown.

In a little more than half an hour he saw one of them coming.

It was Cheyenne Charlie. His tall, straight form showed up in military style on the back of his horse, and the dark, silky beard he wore could be plainly seen in the distance.

Wild walked out where he could see him and waved his hand.

Then the scout answered it and put on extra speed.

It was about this time that our hero suddenly heard a call off to the right.

Looking in that direction, he observed Jim Dart coming.

"It is rather queer that they should show up both at the same time, and coming over different routes, too," he mused. "Both have got plenty of game with them, too. They have beaten me on that score, I guess."

In less than two minutes both his friends had reached him.

"Here's two hams from a bear I plugged through ther eye," said Cheyenne Charlie, as he let the meat drop upon the grass.

"And here's a couple of haunches of venison," added Jim Dart; "and also a brace of prairie hens."

"Well, you both did better than I did," answered Wild. "I struck a bunch of pheasants and got a few of them, and then I was forced to shoot something that is not good to eat. There's his body rolled up over there."

"A catamount!" exclaimed the scout. "Was he showin' fight when you plugged him, Wild?"

"Not to me. He was just going to leap on the back of Spitfire and chew him up when I saw him. I brought him down quickly enough then."

"I bet you did, Wild!" and Dart's face shone out in admiration for his chum.

The two boys were about of an age and had been as close as brothers since they had met a few months before at a settlement near Fort Bridger.

They would have resembled each a great deal, too, if it were not for the fact that Jim Dart wore his hair short.

Like Jim, Cheyenne Charlie put the greatest confidence in Young Wild West and invariably waited for him to tell him what to do.

He was an experienced scout and Indian trailer, too, and he was Wild's senior by at least ten years.

But that made no difference.

Wild seldom made a mistake.

He was as cool and courageous as any man who had ever placed the butt of a rifle to his shoulder, and this, added to the fact that he never missed when he pulled a trigger, made him a person to be respected and looked up to.

"Ain't it about time you had a fire started—I see you've got it all ready to light?" asked Charlie, as he pointed to the heap of dry brushwood.

"I thought I would wait for you fellows to get here," was the rejoinder. "I thought perhaps you wouldn't want to start a fire here."

"Why, how is that?" queried Jim Dart.

"There is a settlement just the other side of that timber strip over there."

"A settlement!" echoed Cheyenne Charlie. "Well, it must be a new one, then. I was all through this part of the country a little over a year ago, an' there wasn't any signs of anything like a settlement to be seen. There were quite a few bufflers here, which is somethin' I don't see now."

"The settlement is there, all right," said Wild. "I haven't seen it, but I was told so a few minutes ago by Rustling Nell, the Prairie Pearl."

"Prairie Pearl! Who in blazes is she?"

"That is all I can tell you, except that she is a downright Western girl in every sense of the word."

"I should like to see her," ventured Jim Dart.

"Let us ride over to the settlement, then. She just got out of sight behind the timber as you fellows came up."

After a short consultation they decided to go over to the settlement, and if there was no convenient hotel to put up at they would form their camp there.

CHAPTER II.

A BULLY IS TAUGHT A LESSON.

The three got their belongings together and at once set out to reach the settlement.

According to what the girl had told Wild, they judged that it was not more than three miles distant.

As they rode along our hero told his two pards just what the Prairie Pearl had told him.

The part about No Man's Ranch interested Charlie the most.

"She said you'd better look out an' not git too close to No Man's Ranch, or ther goblins would git you, did she? I wonder where this No Man's Ranch is? It certainly are a queer name for a ranch. No Man's, hey? 'Cordin' to that, there ain't no one as lives there."

"Not necessarily," remarked Jim. "If you should go by the name, it would mean that no man owned it. A woman could, in that case, don't you see?"

"That might be, but I don't think that's what she meant, do you, Wild?"

"Well, I can't say as I have an idea exactly what she meant," replied our hero. "She might have just said that in her harum-scarum way, you know."

They had reached the woods by this time, and, taking the trail the girl had followed, Wild led his partners on till they came out on the other side.

Sure enough, a little settlement of perhaps thirty roughly-built houses was before them.

And the distance was less than a mile.

Our three friends rode right on till they reached the heart of the village.

There was the usual supply store, and nearby was a log building with a sign signifying it was a hotel.

The houses were not very close together, as each of them sat on a large plot of land that was tilled by the owners.

Our friends came to a halt in front of the supply store, and just then the Prairie Pearl came out.

She looked up with a smile when she saw Wild, and, waving her hand, called out:

"Hello, Young Wild West! So you've got your two friends with you, have you? Well, they do seem all right, I must say. You're the best lookin' in the bunch, though. Goin' to stop here in Markdown over night?"

She rattled this off so fast that Jim Dart was amazed, while Cheyenne Charlie simply grinned.

"She's all right," the scout said in a whisper to Dart. "I'll bet she kin ride a horse an' shoot as good as a man."

The storekeeper and two or three loungers now came out, and they stood there staring at the new arrivals.

"I reckon I don't want to buy any pelts," the storekeeper ventured, as he noticed the skin of the mountain lion Wild had with him.

"That makes it all right, then," retorted the boy. "We don't want to sell any."

"Oh!"

"Seems to be putty soon fur a chap of his age, don't he, Hageman?" spoke up the biggest of the three loungers on the stoop.

He was a raw-boned, powerful-looking fellow, big enough to cope with an ox.

But when he referred to Young Wild West in a sarcastic manner he was making a mistake, though he, of course, was not aware of it.

"See here, my friend," said Wild, looking him squarely in the face, "I don't think it necessary for you to talk that way. If you have an idea that I am pretty soon, I would advise you to keep it to yourself till I have gone out of your hearing."

"What-a-a-t!" gasped the fellow, lifting his chin in astonishment. "Are you talkin' to me, young feller?"

"I certainly am."

"Look out you don't rile me, then; 'cause if you do there'll be trouble, an' I hate to hurt a boy."

"Don't you hesitate a minute, my friend. I am a boy, I'll own, but don't you have any foolish idea of hurting me. I have met such big bluffers as you before."

The men on the store stoop acted as though the building was about to fall on them.

It was evident that the big man was a sort of a bully around there, and the fact of a boy talking to him in that way was a wonderful surprise to them.

"See here, you Lank Forbes!" exclaimed the Prairie Pearl, who had been waiting at the side of her horse listening to the conversation, "just you let that young fellow alone, do you hear!"

"Don't stop him, miss," said Wild, smiling as though he was enjoying it thoroughly, which he was. "If he wants to bother with me just let him go ahead. I have met so many big bluffers that I am used to them. If he tackles me I might fool him. Anyhow, I am certain that I won't get hurt."

At this the bully jumped down from the stoop, and as Wild saw him coming, he quickly slipped out of the saddle.

He met the fellow halfway, too, and as a pair of long arms shot out to grab him, he stepped nimbly aside and dealt the big bluffer a stinging blow on the ear.

He staggered back in a dazed sort of a way and held onto his ear as though he wanted to know if it was still there.

"Who—who done that?" he cried in a rage.

Young Wild West was now just in the right humor for him.

"I did it, you big fool!" he answered. "I am going to

do some more of the same kind of work, too. I am going to give you the worst thrashing you ever had, and if you dare draw a gun on me I'll drop you dead in your tracks!"

"Hooray for Young Wild West!" cried the Prairie Pearl. "Gee! But I guess he knows his business. Lick him good, my boy! Lick him within an inch of his life! He's no good, anyhow, and he's got most everybody around here afraid of him. That's it!"

The last remark referred to a punch that Lank Forbes, as she called him, got on the end of his nose.

Wild saw that he could whip the man with the greatest ease, and he was just angered enough to do it.

But he was in no hurry about it, for all that.

Biff!

This time he hit him on the chin with a left swing and the bully landed on his back in the road.

As the fallen man struggled to a sitting posture he drew his revolver.

But Wild kicked it out of his hand before he could raise it.

"I ought to shoot you for that," he said, calmly, "but I won't. I am going to make you promise to behave yourself in the future, though, and I am going to make you do it right before the whole crowd. Get up on your feet or I'll hit you while you are down! Get up, I say!"

Probably twenty or thirty men had gathered by this time, and they looked on in amazement as Lank Forbes, the bully of the settlement, was knocked down by a mere boy.

But when they heard what Wild said to him after kicking the shooter out of his hand they eagerly waited to see the outcome of the affair.

There was not one in the crowd who thought of taking the man's part.

They enjoyed seeing him get a thrashing.

Probably the most interested spectator of the lot was the girl who had said she was Rustling Nell, the Prairie Pearl.

Her face fairly beamed with joy when she saw how the bully was getting knocked about.

Forbes sat still on the ground for the space of a second after the revolver had been kicked from his hand.

Then a savage growl escaped his lips and he leaped to his feet.

He was no sooner in an upright position than he grabbed a wicked looking knife from his belt and rushed upon Wild.

But with a calm smile playing about his features, the boy stepped nimbly aside, and, putting out his foot, tripped the man.

Flat upon his stomach he fell, the knife falling from his hand.

With the agility of a squirrel, Wild fell upon him, and, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, pulled him to his feet with such force as to nearly choke him.

Then he began slapping him with his open hand, first on one side of the head, then on the other.

The blows were not gentle ones, either, and soon the big bully was howling like a whipped schoolboy.

"Are you going to be good?" asked our hero. "Are you going to behave yourself, you big blubbering coward!"

"I'll kill you for this!" shrieked the enraged man, who seemed helpless to defend himself.

"You will, eh? Take that, then!" and, catching him over his hip suddenly, Wild sent him whirling over as though he had been a big bundle of rags.

He struck the ground on his head and shoulders with such force as to render him temporarily unconscious.

Then for the first time the dashing boy looked around at the crowd.

"He isn't such a dangerous fellow, after all, is he?" he observed when his eyes fell upon the storekeeper.

"Waal, no!" was the reply. "He ain't no more'n a baby in your hands, young feller. You must be a regular prize fighter, I reckon."

"Oh, no! I am not a prize fighter. I am pretty strong and active, and I have a way of keeping cool, that's all. The keeping cool part of it is best, I think. If I had done the right thing I should have shot the man when he first attacked me. But I didn't feel like doing it just then. Now, he is coming to; just hear him promise to be good!"

Lank Forbes at that moment got upon his elbow and stared around in a dazed sort of way.

"Well, how do you feel now?" asked our hero, as he stepped over to him. "Are you going to promise me to be good?"

There was no reply, but the man slowly arose to his feet and started to walk away.

"Hold on!" cried Wild, springing forward and seizing him by the arm. "I want you to tell me that you are going to behave yourself in the future—tell it to me so everyone can hear it, too."

"All right, then, I'll behave myself in ther future; I'll be good."

This was said in a rather low tone, but they all heard it, though, and then a burst of cheering and laughter went up.

The fellow slunk away, and from that moment he lost his prestige in the settlement.

But he was Young Wild West's mortal enemy, just the same.

"Hooray!" cried the Prairie Pearl, as she mounted her waiting horse. "Young Wild West, you're a regular cyclone. I'm goin' home now an' tell dad about you. Good-by!"

"Goodby!" answered Wild, lifting his hat.

As he rode away he turned to the storekeeper and said:

"Can we get accommodations in this town to stay over night?"

"I don't think you kin git beds at ther hotel; it's full now. But I'll tell you what you kin do."

"What's that?"

"You see that shanty over there with ther door painted brown?"

"Yes."

"Well, that belongs to me an' it's empty. You're welcome to stop in it over night, an' you won't be charged a cent for ther privilege. There's a hearth there, so you kin cook your own grub in good shape."

"What do you think about it, boys, shall we stay?" asked Wild, turning to Charlie and Jim, who had remained seated on their horses, with their arms folded while the excitement was in progress.

"I reckon we may as well stay here till mornin'," answered the scout. "It are putty near night now, an' there's no need of pitchin' a camp somewhere when we kin have a house."

"I agree with Charlie," said Jim. "It strikes me that it is going to rain before morning, too, and it is better to be under a roof when it rains than to be out in a camp."

"Well, stay it is, then. We accept your offer, sir," and the boy turned to the storekeeper.

Without any further ado they rode over to the shanty and found the door unlocked.

The building was a two-roomed one, and was in pretty good shape.

In a few minutes they were taking things easy and getting ready for supper.

There were one or two little needed articles to be purchased from the store, so Jim Dart went over to get them.

The storekeeper was very pleasant and wanted to chat with him, so after he had asked about a dozen questions, Jim thought he would ask him one.

"Do you know of a place called No Man's Ranch anywhere around here?" he queried.

"I reckon I do," was the reply. "It's about nine miles from here. But I reckon you fellers don't want to bother around no sich place as that is."

"Why, is there anything wrong about the ranch?"

"I should say there was, young feller. No one that has went there in ther last three months has been seen ag'in! There's an awful mystery about that place."

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE EXCITEMENT AT THE SETTLEMENT.

When Jim Dart got back to the shanty the first thing he spoke about was what the storekeeper had told him about No Man's Ranch.

Cheyenne Charlie showed much interest and Wild began to grow a trifle curious.

"We've got to pay a visit to that place, I reckon," said the scout. "Though," and he shook his head, "I don't much like to interfere with ghosts or goblins, or such like."

"I guess you have had it proved to you pretty strongly that no such things as ghosts or goblins exist, outside of imagination," retorted Wild. "You may depend upon it

that if there is anything weird or peculiar about No Man's Ranch it is caused by the living, and not by the spirits of the departed. Just to prove it to you over again, Charlie, I'll undertake to investigate the thing. We are in no particular hurry to get to Cheyenne City, so I guess we can stay around this part of the country for a couple of days or so."

"Sure we can!" exclaimed Jim Dart. "This seems to be quite and interesting place, anyhow. We've got a genuine Western bully here and one of the real strenuous border girls, not to speak of a ranch that has a sort of a mystery attached to it."

While the three talked over the matter they were preparing a meal for themselves, and when it was ready they ate heartily.

There was water nearby, so they did not have to carry it to their horses, but simply tied them with lariats so they could help themselves.

After supper Wild and Charlie took a stroll around the settlement, leaving Jim in charge of their temporary quarters.

Our hero wanted to hear something more about No Man's Ranch.

He knew that the bar of the hotel would be the place to hear all sorts of gossip, so after they had walked around a bit he led the way to it.

As it was in the fall of the year, the nights were quite chilly, so the door of the bar-room was closed when they went up on the stoop.

Wild opened it and saw that there was a pretty good assemblage inside.

The air was thick with tobacco smoke, and the hum of many voices made it seem as though there was an animated discussion going on.

Almost the first person Wild saw was the man he had thrashed that afternoon.

It was he who was doing the most of the talking, too, and our hero motioned to Charlie to come over to the other side of the room, so they would not be noticed by him.

Lank Forbes had recovered pretty well from the rough handling he had received at the hands of our hero, and as he had been imbibing considerable whisky since then, he was just in the humor for almost anything.

The fact of it was that he was trying to make himself solid with the men again by declaring that he had been taken suddenly sick just as he undertook to give the boy a thrashing.

"You all know me putty well, I guess," he was saying. "I reckon that there ain't a man around this part of ther country that kin make me take water—not if I'm right, anyhow."

"You must have been taken putty bad to let that young feller knock you around like he did," retorted the man behind the bar, who had noticed Wild when he come in, and he winked at him as he made the remark.

"I reckon I was. I have had them spells afore, you

know. An awful feeling of dizziness come over me jest as I was goin' to eat him. That upset me so that I couldn't do a thing. I'd give ten dollars if that boy would jest step up in front of me now. I'd jest give him sich a wallop in that he'd never forgit it to his dyin' day. Oh! if he'd only show up jest about now!"

"Well, here I am, you big bluffer!"

It was Wild who said this, and he sprang right before the man as he did so.

If someone had hit Lank Forbes on the top of the head with a club he could not have come any nearer to dropping to the floor.

"Come!" said our hero, sternly, "just hand over that ten dollars, and be quick about it!"

"I—I—," stammered the bully.

"He's gittin' one of his spells ag'in," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie, grinning in his enjoyment of the scene.

A laugh went up at this.

"Come! Put that ten dollars on the bar!" cried Wild, speaking in a severe tone, as though he was trying to make a child obey him. "Put it right out on the bar, now, and be quick about it!"

The bully now began to shake as though he had the ague, though the bystanders nearly all thought about half of it was put on.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and drew forth a bag that was well filled with money.

With trembling fingers he produced a ten dollar bill from the bag."

"Thar it is," he said huskily. "I'll keep my word, Young Wild West. I'm glad to see you, an' I hope you won't take advantage of me, 'cause I've got one of my sick spells on me, an' can't lift a hand to make a fight."

"All right!" laughed our hero. "Now, seeing that you have got plenty of money, we'll give this to the landlord to treat the crowd with. Mine is the best cigar you have got in the house, landlord."

"All right, sir," and the man behind the bar scooped in the bill and placed it in the drawer.

Then everybody smoked and drank, while Lank Forbes, to carry out the plea of sickness, hobbled into the back room and sank into a chair.

There was much jollification in the bar-room after that, but the bully took no part in it whatever.

He was done for, so long as Young Wild West remained in the place.

Our hero found the landlord to be a pretty decent sort of a fellow, and when he got the opportunity he brought up the subject of the ranch that was said to have a mystery attached to it.

"Tain't as bad as what ther storekeeper said," remarked the proprietor of the hotel. "It is a fact, though, that one or two travelers have stopped there an' never been known to leave ther place ag'in. Afore this settlement was here No Man's Ranch used to be a sort of stoppin' place fur travelers as was goin' along ther trail. I've heard stories about murders bein' done there, an' all like

that, but there's never been anything, to my mind, to prove these things. One thing, though, there's been ghosts seen around there after dark, an' that, if anything, would make me think that there might have been murders committed there at some time or other."

"That's so," answered Wild, deciding to let the superstitious man have his own way about it. "There is no one living at the ranch at all, then?"

"No! It is about tumblin' down, fur ther most part. There's some cattle which hangs around there, though, an' when anyone sees 'em out on ther prairie any distance from ther ranch buildin's, they always go fur ther broken cattle pen as though old Satan was after 'em."

"It is a wonder that some thief has not ventured there to lasso the cattle and make off with them."

"One feller did since this settlement has been here. He was found three days after at ther side of ther trail with his insides pretty well torn out of him from ther horns of a bull. He'd managed to crawl that fur, you see, an' then he died. I guess it would be a putty darin' thief that would go there to touch them cattle, if they knowed what kind of a place it was."

"But those that didn't know what kind of a place it was; they could go there and take the cattle, if they went at it in the right way."

"Mebbe they could," and the landlord shook his head. "Mebbe they could, but they haven't yet."

"Well," said Wild, when the man had told him a lot more of similar incidents about the ranch, "I am just interested enough in No Man's Ranch to make a trip there and take a look through the house and buildings."

"I wouldn't do that, if I was you."

"Nonsense! There are no such things as ghosts, and you ought to know that. The fact of the ranch being deserted and that there are a lot of wild cows and bulls hanging around it all the time does not signify anything."

"Mebbe it don't, but how about ther travelers what stopped there when there was someone livin' there? They never was seen after that, you know. How about them?"

"You are getting back to the ghost part of it again," replied Wild, with a smile. "Well, be it as it may, I am going to pay a visit to No Man's Ranch tomorrow."

"If you come back alive I will be surprised," and the landlord shook his head solemnly.

"I'll come back all right; don't worry about that part of it."

"Are your two pards goin' with you?"

"Of course."

"They ain't afraid of ghosts an' goblins, either, then?"

"I guess not. Charlie, here, is a bit superstitious, but he is not afraid to venture into a haunted house."

"I reckon I ain't afraid," spoke up the scout. "Any place Young Wild West leads I will go!"

Having learned all he could—which certainly was not a great deal—Wild and Charlie went back to the shanty.

Jim had grown tired of waiting for them and was pacing back and forth in front of the door.

He did not say a word till they got inside the building.

"There has been three fellows sneaking around near our horses," he said. "I have been watching them for some time. Once I was almost tempted to shoot, but I did not know but it might have been mere curiosity that drew them there, so I thought I would wait till you came back."

"They are outside now, just behind that thick clump of bushes in the rear of the shanty."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Wild. "I will take a walk out to see to the horses, and when I start to come back I will run right into that clump of bushes, as if it was an accident. Then we will find out what they are sneaking around for."

He did not wait an instant, but started out toward the horses, whistling a tune, as though he was simply going to see to them before turning in for the night.

He patted Spitfire on the nose and spoke to him, and then headed straight for the clump of bushes Jim had spoken of.

The next moment he almost fell over three men, who were crouched on the ground in the darkness.

But he was quite ready for them, for with a revolver in either hand, he exclaimed:

"Get up, you sneaking rascals! Get up, or I'll pour some hot lead into you!"

"Don't shoot!" answered one of them. "We ain't here fur no harm. We're strangers in this place, without any money, an' we thought we'd stay here all night in these bushes."

"You did, eh?" retorted Wild. "Well, there is no need of you sleeping out in the frosty air; just come with me. Look out you don't touch your shooters, for if you do it will be the last of you."

The men got upon their feet with surprising quickness, and as dark as it was, Wild saw one of them grab at his belt for a shooter.

There was nothing left for him to do but to drop the rascal, so he covered him as quick as a flash and pressed the trigger.

Crack!

Down he dropped like a lump of lead.

"Now, hold up your hands, or you two will go the same way!" cried Wild in a stern tone of command.

Instead of obeying, they broke away in different directions.

Crack!

One of them dropped, but the other got out of sight of the daring boy.

At this juncture Cheyenne Charlie came rushing out of the shanty.

"Are you all right, Wild?" asked the scout.

"Oh, yes!" was the reply.

"It was you who shot, then?" said Jim.

"Yes, I was compelled to drop two of them."

"Horse thieves?" and Charlie looked at him questioningly.

"I don't know what they were; I became satisfied that they meant to shoot, so I got in ahead of them. Two of them started to get away at once and one of them succeeded. Just strike a match and we will see what they look like."

Jim obeyed and knelt over one of the fallen men.

He proved to be a very rough looking customer, as did the other when they turned their attention that way.

Our friends were certain that they had not seen them in the settlement, but as they heard people, who had been attracted by the shooting, coming, they waited to see if the men had belonged around there.

The storekeeper was one of the first to arrive on the scene.

As soon as he heard what had happened he viewed the bodies.

"They are strangers in these parts," he said, shaking his head.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ADVENTURE OF JOE SCALDER.

The three men Wild encountered in the bushes near the shanty our friends were stopping in over night were indeed strangers to the settlement of Markdown.

They were three villains who had been driven from a wagon train, after having been picked up and taken care of for three days.

They had been found in an almost destitute condition, without arms or a thing to eat, having been left in that way of a band of lawless Indians and halfbreeds.

But, like the traditional snake that had been warmed by the bosom of the peasant, they had stung the ones who befriended them by attempting to rob them.

The men of the wagon train had turned them adrift in much better shape than they had found them, however.

They had supplied them with a rifle and revolver and a hunting knife apiece.

And it so happened that the three had drifted to the settlement after dark.

Being without horses, they naturally wanted them.

And when they had sneaked about in the dusk of the evening and found three as fine ones as they could wish for tied near the outskirts of the little town, they resolved to wait till an opportune moment arrived and help themselves to them.

But they had certainly made a mistake in selecting those particular horses to steal.

The sharp eyes of Jim Dart had detected them and Young Wild West had shot and killed two of their number.

The survivor, who managed to make good his escape, went by the name of Joe Scaldar.

When he once got out of sight of Young Wild West he ran with the speed of a deer without choosing any particular direction.

Chance led him to the last house on the east end of the settlement.

He had an idea that he would be pursued, so he took all kinds of chances by entering the rude stable in the rear of the shanty and taking a horse he found there.

He found a bridle, and, not waiting to look up a saddle in the dark, he put it on the horse's head, and then, mounting, rode away in the darkness.

Joe Scaldar, being an absolute stranger in those parts, did not know where he was going, nor did he care, so long as he got away from the daring young fellow who had shot his two companions and killed them.

He realized that he had had a narrow escape.

He had not ridden more than eight miles when a thunderstorm came up very suddenly.

The villain began looking about for shelter.

But there appeared to be nothing but an endless waste of prairie, as far as he could see in the darkness.

Presently it began to lightning sharply, and then during one of the flashes he caught sight of a ranch off to his left not so very far away.

Scaldar promptly turned his horse in that direction, resolving to get under some shed, or into some sort of an outbuilding until the storm passed over.

He reached a shed just as the rain began to come down in torrents.

"An ugly storm," he muttered. "I never seen many like it this time of year. I guess it won't last long, though, an' then I kin go on. Poor Dan and Bill! They had to go under, it seems. Well, if I ever git ther chance I'll drop ther feller what did ther job fur 'em!"

The villain had scarcely rid himself of these thoughts when the horse he had ridden there uttered a frightened snort.

The animal began prancing about wildly, and then a vivid flash that was not caused by lightning shot out before the face of the villain.

"Prepare to die!" exclaimed a sepulchral voice, and Joe Scaldar's hair arose on end.

Before him he saw a figure that was apparently half man, half bull, and then, as the light died away, his throat was gripped and he was thrown upon his back.

This was altogether too much for the nerves of the man, and he fainted away.

When he came to perhaps half an hour later he found himself out in the rain with a number of cattle prancing about him.

Some of them trampled upon him and others tried to gore him.

Self-preservation is the first law of nature, and Joe Scaldar became suddenly possessed of superhuman strength.

Just as a fearful clap of thunder rang out and the falling of splintered timber sounded on the man's ears he sprang to his feet and ran for his life.

A thunderbolt had hit the shed that was within but a few feet of him, and the cattle that would certainly have been the death of him fled in terror.

That gave him the only chance he had for his life.

Though he knew nothing of it, Joe Scaldar was on the premises of No Man's Ranch, and he was even now running directly toward the dilapidated one-story house that the residents of Markdown feared so much.

He ran full into the end of the building before he saw it and the force of the collision knocked him backward to the ground and almost took the breath from his body.

He lay there for several seconds, the drenching rain pattering upon his bared head and slowly restoring him to his normal state.

The thunder and lightning continued, and during one of the flashes Joe Scaldar saw a window in the end of the house right before him.

But that was not all he noticed.

One of the shutters had blown open by the fierce wind, and during the brief interval of the flash he saw that there was no sash there.

Instantly he resolved to crawl through the window and get into the house.

The fierce and exciting experience he had undergone made him feel as though he wanted to get somewhere out of sight of everything.

Horror and terror both had hold upon him now.

With a mighty effort he got upon his feet and clutched the sill of the open window.

He did not try to force open the other shutter, but drew himself quickly inside the house.

It was as dark as the grave where he now found himself, but that mattered not.

Waiting till the next flash of lightning came, the villain located a comfortable corner where a pile of empty bags lay and crawled to it.

Then his nerves relaxed and he became unconscious.

How long he remained in that condition Scaldar had no idea, but it must have been that he passed from the faint into a deep sleep.

Anyhow, the sun was shining when he opened his eyes, and, feverish and trembling, he arose to a sitting posture and looked around him.

It took him two or three seconds to realize where he was, and when he had fully done so he sank back again.

But only for a minute or two did he lay there thinking.

"I must get away from this place," he muttered, rubbing his eyes wildly. "I never had an idea that such things could happen as what happened last night. I'll never forget it as long as I live. It was awful!"

The wretch trembled as though he had the ague as he thought of the spectre that had confronted him and what followed.

It was so real that he could not possibly shake it off.

"I kin see that thing yet," he groaned, as he made his way across the room to the window. "I must git out in ther sun."

As he placed his hands on the window sill to climb out the one open shutter slammed to with a bang.

Then, to his surprise and consternation, hurried footsteps could be heard approaching that room from some other part of the house.

Scaldar made a violent effort to force open the shutters and get out.

But it was useless.

They withstood the shock he caused by throwing his weight against them.

He was just about to use his foot when the door at the further end of the room opened and two figures covered with blankets darted in and seized him.

Joe Scaldar uttered a yell for help, but he could not repeat it, as a heavy hand was pressed over his mouth.

Not a word did his captors say; they merely overpowered him and then bound him hand and foot.

When this was done they picked him up bodily and carried him from the room, after first pulling a bag over his head so he could not see.

Though he was not gagged, the villain did not cry out.

The fact of the hand being pressed over his mouth when he made the first outcry was sufficient to convince him that he would endanger himself if he made a noise.

Across the old-fashioned room the two figures carried him, and then one of them opened the door to another apartment and he was taken inside.

It was a dark, musty smelling place, evidently not having been visited in some little time.

The bag was now removed from the head of the prisoner and he tried to look around.

But the light in the room was so faint that he could not see much.

While one of the robed figures kept his hand upon the villain the other busied himself by tearing up some boards in the center of the floor.

Joe Scaldar was in a great state of terror again.

He felt that his last hour had arrived.

Up to this time he had been unable to speak.

Now he suddenly found the use of his tongue and exclaimed:

"Have mercy on me! I didn't come here on purpose. I only seen ther ranch when ther lightnin' flashed last night, an' I thought I'd git under a shed till ther rain was over. Let me go, won't you?"

"We will let you go right away," was the reply from one of them.

But the words were spoken as though they were not meant, and Scaldar realized this pretty quick.

"Let me go!" he cried, in a frenzy. "I'll never do a wrong thing as long as I live if you do. I stole a horse last night, but if you'll only let me go I'll take him right back where I got him, if I only kin find him. I've been a putty bad man, but I'll reform if you'll only let me go!"

"Did you ever kill a man?" asked one of the figures, looking at the captive sharply through two small holes that were cut in the blanket that was over his head.

"Yes, I did kill a halfbreed onct. I'll own up to anything. Please let me go, won't you?"

"What did you kill the halfbreed for?" came the question.

"'Cause he had a pile of money and I wanted it."

"Did you get the money after you'd killed him?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with it?"

"I spent it."

"In what way?"

"I gambled it an' drank it up."

"That was a fine way to do with the money, wasn't it?"

"I couldn't help it, mister."

"Of course you couldn't. What is your name?"

"Joe Scalder."

"A fine name that!"

"I can't help it, mister."

"Oh! I know you can't help it."

"Won't you please let me go, gents?"

"What do you think of him?" asked one of the other in a low tone.

"I guess he's tellin' ther truth," was the reply.

"Oh, yes, I'm tellin' ther truth!" cried Scalder. "I won't never do anything wrong ag'in if you'll only let me go. I've been punished enough since I struck this ranch. It was awful last night! I don't know how it is that I'm alive now!"

"Nor I, either," said one of the men. "But since you are alive, I guess we won't chuck you in ther deep hole under ther house till after ther boss gits here. If you'll promise not to try to run away we'll untie you, too. If you try to git away you won't git very far. so you had better do jest as you are told."

"I'll do anything you say!" exclaimed the villain, earnestly.

The two then held a short whispered conversation, the result being that the bonds of Scalder were severed.

Then he was helped to his feet and led from the dark room into a more pleasant one, where a table was being set for breakfast by a grizzled, wrinkled-faced old woman.

"This man is all right, I guess," said one of the men, as he threw the blanket from his head.

The old woman gazed at the face of Scalder keenly.

"He looks like a confirmed scoundrel," she answered. "But I'll bet he is a coward."

CHAPTER V.

THE PRAIRIE PEARL IS CAUGHT NAPPING.

The excitement caused by the killing of the two men and the escape of the third soon died out, and when the

crowd had left them Young Wild West and his two partners arranged to turn in for the night.

Wild fixed it so that one of them would be on guard all the time by dividing the night in three parts.

This would give all hands a chance to get enough sleep to answer them.

This was a precaution that our hero always took, no matter where they were when away from home.

Of course, if they had been in a hotel in some good-sized town it would have been different.

But the night passed and nothing occurred to disturb them.

Charlie had been the last to go on watch, and he did not arouse Wild and Jim until seven o'clock.

It had rained hard during a part of the night, but the sun was shining brightly now, and when our hero got up he nodded with satisfaction.

"It will be a fine day, I guess," he observed. "Just the kind of a day to investigate the mystery that concerns No Man's Ranch."

"That's right," said Jim Dart. "I can't get started too soon, for my part."

"An' I'm anxious to see what's there myself," added Cheyenne Charlie.

"Well, get some of that bear meat cooked and we will start out. We don't want to fool away more than a couple of days around here."

Charlie already had the fire started, so it did not take him long to get the steaks and the coffee on.

As the supply store was right at hand, they could live pretty high on things that could not be obtained when they were out on the prairie miles away from a habitation.

As soon as breakfast was over they got ready to start out.

As they were mounting, the proprietor of the hotel came over, and, addressing Wild, said:

"Don't forget to come back an' report, as you said you would, Young Wild West."

"I shan't forget," was the rejoinder. "We will come back alive, never fear."

"Well, I wouldn't want to go nosin' around No Man's Ranch myself, that's all."

"You shouldn't be so squeamish about such things."

"I can't help it; it's my way, you know."

The man really seemed as though he felt sorry that they were going to pay a visit to the ranch.

He had undoubtedly taken a liking to them and felt that it would be a shame for anything to happen to them.

But when he saw the three ride away as calmly and unconcerned as though they were going to a picnic he shook his head in a puzzled way.

"That Young Wild West is a wonderful feller," he said to one of his friends. "He is not afraid of anything. I reckon."

Our three friends rode along at an easy pace, following the trail that would lead past No Man's Ranch.

Nine miles was a very small ride for them, and when

they came in sight of the tumbledown buildings it seemed as though they had scarcely got started yet.

Wild called a halt and they sat in the saddle surveying the ranch with critical eyes.

"It has all the appearance of being a deserted place," he remarked. "But it seems rather strange to me that the cattle should stay around there all the time. There is quite a bunch of cows over there, when you come to look at them. It can't be that they are staying there just because they were bred on the place. They would be apt to stray off and mix with other herds."

"Perhaps someone does live there and keeps it a secret," said Jim.

"I rather think you are right," our hero rejoined. "I'll tell you what we'll do! It won't do for us all to go there in a bunch if there really is someone there, for they could easily hide, or play some of their tricks if they saw us. You two can ride on ahead, and after you get far enough past to make it appear that you have no idea of visiting the place, you can ride across the prairie and keep the old barns and sheds between you and the house. I will ride over to the woods there and approach the ranch from the rear. That will make it so we will both get there at the same time, about. The call of the quail twice in succession will be the signal we will use, if any is necessary."

"All right," said Jim. "I guess we understand exactly."

"I reckon we do," added the scout.

Without any further talk on the subject they parted, Charlie and Jim riding along over the trail and Wild heading for the woods that lay half a mile distant.

Our hero let his horse go at a pretty fast gait, as he had a little further to go than his partners, and soon reached the woods.

It was not a very wide strip of timber, but it was pretty thickly wooded, for all that.

He began working his way through in the direction he wanted to go, being forced to let his horse walk on account of the dense growth of bushes.

Just as he had come to a halt to figure out the best way to get through, he heard a voice exclaim:

"Don't you go too near that tree, you inquisitive little tenderfoot! If you do, folks wouldn't be able to tell who you was when you git back to the ranch. That's full of wild honey there, but we can't git it now. There! What did I tell you? One of the varmints has stung you! Oh! if you ain't a simpleton! Whoop! Ha, ha, ha!"

Young Wild West felt like joining in that laugh, for he recognized the speaker as Rustling Nell, the Prairie Pearl.

It struck him to dismount and creep through the bushes a ways and see what was going on.

No sooner thought of when he was putting it in execution.

Suddenly the laugh of the Western girl changed to a shrill scream of fright.

The boy made a leap forward and reached an open spot.

It was a startling scene that Wild came upon.

A huge grizzly bear was in the act of striking the Prairie Pearl with its paw, while a boy stood beating off the brute with a club.

The young dead-shot raised his rifle.

Crack!

As the report rang out the grizzly staggered back and thrust out its paws blindly and then fell in a heap to the ground.

Young Wild West had pierced the brain with a bullet!

The Prairie Pearl sank back to the ground, and, dropping the club he had been trying to beat off the bear with, the boy strove to lift her up.

Then Wild, with the still smoking rifle in his hand, stepped forward.

"How do you do, Rustling Nell?" he called out. "I am very glad that I was able to be of some service to you. The big brute did not touch you with its claws, I hope."

"No," panted the girl; "I ain't hurt, Young Wild West. Thank you for happenin' along. I guess I'd have been a goner but for you."

"Well, the bear did have you dead to rights, I will say. How was it that you allowed yourself to be caught napping?"

"Foolin' with the little tenderfoot here is what done it, I suppose. Say, Young Wild West!"

"What is it, Miss Prairie Pearl?"

"You won't say anything about this over at the settlement, will you?"

"Why?"

"If you was to I'd be ashamed to go over there again. It is the first time that either man or beast ever got the best of me, and I don't want it to be known."

"All right. You can bet I will never mention it," and our hero smiled.

The girl now got up.

"Confound you and the bees!" she exclaimed, looking at the boy.

"Don't say that, cousin," the boy answered. "I was doing my best to drive away the bear when the gentleman shot it."

"That's so, Tom!" and her manner suddenly changed. "I didn't mean that when I said it. I am proud to think that you didn't run. If I had not let my rifle drop when I was laughing because the bee stung you I would have shot the big brute myself, and then Young Wild West's services would not have been needed. Great hemlock! but I thought I was a goner when I felt the bear's hot breath on my face!"

She picked her rifle up from the grass and then patted the boy, who was not more than fourteen, on the shoulder.

"This is my cousin, Tom Ostberg, from the East," she added, turning to Wild. "Shake hands with the best shot and coolest hand in the West, Tom."

The boy did not hesitate a moment to do as he was bid.

"I am awful glad you came just as you did, sir," he

said. "I guess Nell lost her nerve when she saw that bear comin' for her through the bushes. I didn't think of picking up her rifle and shooting it, and I am glad I didn't, for I would not have killed it, I suppose, and then things would have been worse than ever. Nell calls you Young Wild West, and I am glad to be able to tell the folks when I go back East that I met you. We have heard of you, even there."

"That seems rather surprising," retorted Wild. "Here is the Prairie Pearl, who was born and reared in these parts who never heard of me until yesterday. And yet you say you have heard of me in the East."

"Oh, yes! Your name has been in lots of the papers. I told Nell last night about it when she came home and related how you fixed the big bully in front of the store over in the settlement. She was surprised when I told her that it did not surprise me a bit, since Young Wild West had a way of doing things like that. I am a great reader, I am, and I have been reading about your gold mines and your fights with Indians and renegades. You know our papers in the East sometimes clip things from the ones printed out here."

"Well, I suppose they do. But I wish they would leave out of the papers a little more than they do. If it is natural for me to be getting into all sorts of scrapes and dangers, and then getting out again, I don't see as there is any necessity of putting it in the papers."

"I do. It makes the best kind of reading."

"Probably you folks in the East think so."

"Of course we do."

The Prairie Pearl was not attired in a hunting suit, as she had been the day before, and Wild could but note that she looked more demure than he had an idea she could possibly look.

She seemed to be heartily ashamed of herself from allowing herself to be taken at a disadvantage by the bear.

"Let me have your knife, will you?" she said to Wild.

"I guess I'll rip off that fellow's coat."

"I will be glad to do it for you, Miss Prairie Pearl."

"No, you won't skin the brute, unless you want the pelt yourself."

"I don't want it, I assure you."

"Then I will do the skinning."

Our hero let her have her own way about it.

He knew that she would not possibly give in, anyway.

He had seen just enough of her to know that much.

"What are you doing around here?" she asked, as she deftly worked the knife in the skinning process.

"I am on my way to No Man's Ranch."

"You are?" and her eyes opened wide.

"Yes. My partners are going there, too. I came this way so I could approach the rear of the house. I have an idea that there isn't so much of a mystery about that place as some folks think."

"You had better let the place alone, though."

"Non-ense!"

"Say!" and she looked at him eagerly as she spoke. "Will you let me go over to No Man's Ranch with you?"

"Certainly," answered Young Wild West without the least hesitation. "I'm glad you changed your mind about my going there."

He had an idea that the stories about the ranch amounted to absolutely nothing, and he never thought of there being the least danger.

"They say there's ghosts over at No Man's Ranch," spoke up little Tom Ostberg. "Well, I guess I ain't afraid of ghosts, anyhow, if Nell is."

"Who's afraid of ghosts, or anything else?" asked the girl, looking at him scornfully.

"Well, everyone over at your place seems to be a little afraid of No Man's Ranch, just the same," he asserted, a trifle hotly. "You wouldn't want to go there, either, if Young Wild West wasn't going."

"You shut up, Tom Ostberg!" she cried. "To show you that I ain't afraid, I'll lead the way there! We'll leave the bear behind till we come back."

CHAPTER VI.

RATHER MYSTERIOUS.

Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart rode on leisurely till they thought they had gone far enough to make the turn for the ranch.

Then they headed that way, keeping the outbuildings between them and the house.

"This ain't no deserted place," remarked the scout, as they neared the big cattle pen that had tumbled down in some places. "Them cattle ain't hangin' around here jest for what they pick up themselves. An' look at that mowin' ground over there; that's been cut this year."

"You are right," Jim answered. "I am rather of the opinion that someone is living on the ranch."

"S'pose we stop here behind this shed an' watch through ther cracks till we see Wild git in sight?"

"That's about the proper thing to do, I guess."

So when they got pretty close to the old one-story house they halted and went under the shed.

Fresh hoofprints could be found there, and the two were not slow to take notice of them, too.

Cheyenne Charlie nodded significantly when he saw them.

"I reckon someone is around here," he said.

"Yes. But let us be as quiet as possible and wait. We may learn something."

They dismounted, and, keeping hold of the bridle reins, walked over to the back of the shed.

There was a board off there, and they took up a position so they could see in the direction Wild would come from when he neared the ranch.

They waited and watched till they grew tired, for our

here did not show up, and neither did they see any signs of life about the place, beyond the cattle that were grazing about.

But after awhile they saw three horses approaching the rear of the house.

One of them was ridden by Young Wild West, and Charlie and Jim were surprised when they recognized him, for they had not expected him to come there with anyone.

"It's Wild, all right; an' there's a gal an' a little boy with him," said Charlie, when he had taken a good look at them. "Ther gal is ther Prairie Pearl, too, though she ain't got ther fancy huntin' rig on that we seen her in yesterday."

"It is the Prairie Pearl, sure enough," nodded Jim. "I wonder what Wild is bringing her and that boy over here for? It seems strange for him to do a thing of that kind."

"Well, Wild often does queer things, you know."

"That's right."

The three were keeping a strip of trees and bushes between them and the house, but Charlie and Jim had a good view of them from where they were.

On they came until they were within a hundred yards of the house and a little more than twice that distance from the shed.

If there really was anyone in the house the three would be within plain view in a few seconds now.

Charlie and Jim realized this.

The next instant they emerged from the cover of the trees and rode boldly up to the building at a gallop.

Then they heard Wild give the signal they always used to let each other know where they were.

The scout answered it, and then they saw Wild give a nod.

The next moment the three rode around to the back of the house and they could no longer see them.

Charlie and Jim were just about to mount and ride up to the front when a scream of terror rang out and the boy rode into view as though he was flying for his life.

Wild's two partners looked at each other.

What did it mean?

That was the question they would have asked each other if they had used their tongues just then.

But at that minute they were too astonished to speak.

But both quickly mounted, however, and started to ride around to the back of the building.

They got there in short order, the boy becoming lost in the strip of woods as they did so.

There was not a sign of Young Wild West or the Prairie Pearl to be seen!

"Charlie," said Jim, in a choking voice, "what does it all mean?"

The scout shook his head.

"I don't know, Jim," he answered.

Just then he happened to look off to the left and catch sight of Spitfire.

The sorrel was standing still, but his master was not there.

The two quickly rode over to the intelligent steed.

He did not offer to run away, but let them ride right up to him.

Then they saw the horse the girl had been riding.

It was trotting around a few yards distant apparently a little frightened at something.

"Jim," said Charlie, solemnly, "Wild an' ther gal are in that house."

"Do you think so?" asked Dart, who was trying hard to regain his composure.

"Where else kin they be?"

That was the argument that clinched it.

Where else could they be? true enough.

"We've got to find them!" exclaimed Jim, resolutely.

"That's right. We've got to git in this old tumble-down ranch, goblins or no goblins!"

"There's a mystery in the way they disappeared so suddenly."

"Yes, there is."

"If we could only have headed that boy off! He would have been able to tell us just what happened."

"It is too bad we couldn't."

"Suppose we give ther signal—it might be that Wild is somewhere so he kin hear it and answer it?"

"Go ahead."

Jim gave the call of a quail twice and then they strained their ears to listen.

It was answered almost immediately from within the building.

"There!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie. "Now we know he is in ther ranch!"

"And that means that we've got to give him a lift, if he is in trouble."

"Oh, he must be in trouble."

"Not necessarily. It might be that he and the girl started to go inside and the boy became frightened and dashed off."

"It might be. But it was all done too quick for anything like that. No! You kin bet on it that Wild is in some kind of scrape. Jest let us leave our horses here an' we'll go inside ther ranch house."

They dismounted and allowed their horses to remain there untied.

They were trained so they would not go far away, anyhow.

They walked up to the door in the rear of the house, which was closed tightly.

There was a pile of clay near the door which looked as though it had been dumped there recently, and near it the weeds and grass had been pretty well trampled down.

"This don't look as though ther house ain't inhabited," said the scout, pointing to these evidences. "You kin bet that Wild an' ther gal went in there ag'in their wills."

"I am afraid you are right, Charlie," replied Jim. "Well,

here goes for a trial at the door! Keep your shooters ready, now!"

As the boy spoke he lifted the latch and gave a push on the door.

Rather to his surprise, it opened readily enough.

Without any hesitation, he walked in, followed by his companion.

Charlie took pains to leave the door wide open when he entered, but he had not taken more than three steps when it shut with a slam.

"That's funny," he said. "Ther wind ain't blowin'."

Before Jim could make a reply the floor suddenly gave way beneath them and they went shooting downward into Stygian darkness.

They brought up on a bed of yielding clay about seven or eight feet below, and as they did so they heard a creaking noise, followed by a slight jar, and then all was still.

"Great catamounts!" cried Cheyenne Charlie, as he scrambled to his feet. "How do you s'pose that was done, Jim?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "It seems to me that we walked right into a regular trap."

"I guess that's right. Now, how are we goin' to git out?"

"I don't know; that is something that remains to be seen."

They had held fast to their revolvers when they went down, and, remaining right where they had landed, Jim produced a match-safe from his pocket and struck a light.

Then, as the flickering flame illuminated the place, they saw something that made them turn deathly pale.

They were standing on the very edge of a deep pit!

They were not slow in stepping back from it, either, and then, just as the match went out, they saw a ladder that touched somewhere above.

"I reckon we kin git out of here," said Charlie, hopefully. "There's a ladder that leads somewhere, anyhow."

"Yes, we——"

Jim did not finish what he was going to say, for at that moment they heard footsteps overhead.

Then a trap-door was opened and a flood of light came into the cellar-like place.

The two immediately crouched in a shadow.

They knew what was up.

Someone was coming down!

Charlie gave Jim's arm a warning pinch.

It meant for him to remain perfectly silent and wait for him to make the first move.

Jim understood.

The next minute they saw the feet of a man step upon the ladder and begin to come down.

When he was halfway down he lowered his head below the floor and listened for a moment.

"I guess they got fixed!" they heard him say to some one above him. "Hand me the lantern and I'll take a look in ther pit."

The lantern was at once forthcoming and the man came on down and stepped on the ground.

He did not flash the rays of the lantern the way toward our friends, fortunately, but started right towards the pit.

A sudden resolve came in the head of Cheyenne Charlie.

He placed his mouth to his companion's ear and whispered:

"We'll put him where he thinks we are!"

Dart nodded.

Then, like two shadows, they crept toward the villain.

As he dropped upon his knees and held the lantern over the edge of the pit Charlie and Jim put a hurried move on and got right behind him.

"That's funny!" they heard him mutter half aloud. "I don't see anything of 'em down there. Ther sharp stones an' pieces of flint must have cut 'em into ribbons. I'll have to git ther big tongs an' fish fur their bodies, I guess, 'cause we want what money they had on 'em. That's what we're here fur—to git money, an' we're doin' fine at it, so fur. It won't be long before we git——"

That was all the man said, for at that moment Cheyenne Charlie gave him a kick that sent him headlong into the pit.

There was a muffled shriek and then all was still.

"Up ther ladder, Jim!" cried the scout. "We've got to git a hustle on us, for we're in ther worst den I ever seen. Move lively, now!"

He had his hand on the ladder as the last word left his lips, and with the agility of a squirrel he went up.

Dart followed him closely, keeping his revolver ready for instant use.

Charlie reached the floor above and found no one to bar his way.

"Come on!" he whispered to Jim. "Ther way is clear!"

Jim stepped up just as the scout opened the door of an adjoining room.

Finding it empty, the scout went on in, Jim right at his heels.

It so happened that the room they had accidentally got in was the one the villain Joe Scaldar had crawled in from the window the night before.

Though the shutters were closed, there was enough light in there for them to see the piles of empty bags in the room.

"I reckon we'll stay in here till we find a way to git Wild an' ther Prairie Pearl out of their trouble," said Charlie.

"Yes, as some thinking has now got to be done, here is just the place to do it," answered Jim.

CHAPTER VII.

WILD AND THE PRAIRIE PEARL ARE CAPTURED.

The Prairie Pearl ran for her horse after telling her young cousin that she was going to lead the way to No Man's Ranch, and he quickly followed her.

Young Wild West looked around, and, finding that there were no more bears around, went for his horse, too.

Five minutes later the three were mounted and riding in company for the ranch.

Rustling Nell had said she was going to lead the way, but she gave way to Young Wild West.

"I look more like a girl tenderfoot than anything else in this rig," she said, apologetically, as she looked at the rather neat-fitting gown she wore. "I only put it on because Tom said he felt that he would look out of sorts to go out with me in his city rig. Mother is fixing up one of the old man's hunting suits to fit him, and tomorrow I'll take him out and teach him how to shoot. I'm real sorry I brought him over to get stung with them honey bees. I wasn't thinking about bears at all, and that's how the grizzly caught me napping."

"Oh, never mind the bear," laughed our hero. "He won't bother you or anyone else again. Speaking of your costume, I must say that your hunting dress does become you better. But it makes no difference about the cut of a person's clothes. As long as the heart is in the right place everything is all right, in my estimation."

"That's what I think," spoke up the boy from the East. "But Nell declares she won't take me out again till I get on that hunting suit aunt is fixing for me."

"Well, it won't hurt you to wear a hunting suit. How long are you going to stay in the West?"

"Just as long as I am welcome."

"It depends on how long he is going to be a tenderfoot," spoke up Nell, curling her lip at the mild appearance of her young cousin.

"I'll learn fast enough," was the spirited rejoinder. "You wouldn't let me bring a rifle along, and if you had I might have showed you something when that bear tackled you."

"I've heard you say what you would have done," was the retort. "You couldn't shoot a bear if you had the muzzle of a gun stuck in his mouth."

"Just wait till tomorrow and I'll show you something in that line."

"All right, Tom, I'll wait."

The Prairie Pearl laughed pityingly, for it was quite evident that she thought it would take a long time to make a Westerner of the boy.

Wild rather enjoyed their conversation.

He knew the girl felt ashamed of having been in the power of the bear, after showing such a reckless way to him the day before, and it hurt her to think that he had been compelled to save her life.

This was rather queer, the reader might say, but Rustling Nell had hitherto thought herself capable of taking care of herself under any and all conditions.

Wild knew he would not get to No Man's Ranch as soon as his partners expected him to, but he hoped they would wait for him somewhere in the near vicinity.

Consequently when he reached the place and heard the signal from Chyenne Charlie he felt satisfied.

The three rode around to the rear of the house, bent on going right into the building, if there was an open door there.

As they brought their horses to a halt to dismount the door suddenly opened and out came a gauze-like net that settled over the forms of Young Wild West and the Prairie Pearl in the twinkling of an eye.

Little Tom Ostberg escaped it by a narrow margin, and, seeing a figure that was seemingly half man, half bull, crouching in the doorway, he uttered a frightened scream and rode away at a breakneck pace, leaving his companions to their fate.

Though Wild had anticipated that there was some sort of trickery connected with the ranch, he was taken completely by surprise when the net fell over him.

He tried to wriggle from its folds, but too late!

It tightened about him and then he was pulled from the back of his horse with a jerk.

The Prairie Pearl, of course, came with him, both landing upon the ground as helpless as though they had been securely bound by a lariat.

The feat had been very neatly executed.

With the breath jarred from their bodies, neither could make an outcry before they were hauled inside the house.

Then three figures wearing bags over their heads caught hold of them and quickly fixed them so it would be impossible for them to cry out, while the half man, half bull, that Tommy Ostberg had become frightened over, stood nodding with approval.

When Wild's eyes rested on this peculiar-looking being he did not seem to be the least bit frightened, nor was he, for that matter.

He knew it was a man, and a bad one at that.

He saw that the bull's head was a preserved one, though rather shabby, at that.

"Your doom is sealed!" exclaimed the strangely disguised man in a sepulchral tone.

"What for?" the boy managed to ask, as the hand that had been covering his mouth was lifted for a moment.

"Don't you know that this is No Man's Ranch?"

"Yes, I heard that was the name of it."

They did not try to stop him from talking now, and as he got into a sitting posture, he looked around in a way that showed he was interested in what he saw.

"You knew this was No Man's Ranch, then?" went on the disguised man, who was plainly the leader of the gang.

"Yes, I knew it."

"What did you come here for then?"

"To see what kind of a place it was."

"Others have come here for the same purpose, but none of them ever went back."

"What became of them?" queried Wild, in his cool way.

"They died!"

"Oh! They died, eh?"

"Yes, they died horrible deaths."

"What made them do that?"

The fellow with the bull's head hesitated for a moment.

Evidently he could not understand why it was that the boy was taking it so coolly.

"You appear to take this as a joke," he ventured, changing his voice to a more common way of speaking.

"No, I can't say that I take this as a joke," replied our hero. "Neither do I think you are intending it as such. But one thing I want to tell you is that if you don't liberate the young lady and myself at once you will be apt to get into trouble."

The man laughed heartily at this.

"You may laugh," said Wild. "Now is the time for you to laugh, but a little later on you will be doing something else. Now, then, I'll give you a chance to make a proposition."

"I want to make no proposition," exclaimed the fellow, assuming the sepulchral voice again. "I simply want to tell you that you have got to die."

"I have always known that since I have been big enough to know anything," retorted Wild, smiling as though he thought it was entirely unnecessary to tell him such a thing as that.

The three men with the bags over their heads looked at each other through the small holes that had been cut for them to see what they were doing.

They could not understand how it was the boy could be so cool.

Instead of being frightened at their looks he was showing signs of being amused.

"He's either a fool or he's crazy, cap," spoke up one of them, addressing the bull's head.

"Have you not been forbidden to speak?" thundered the leader, angrily.

"I forgot, cap. Excuse me. I'm only a new member, you know."

The man was only a new member.

He was no other than Joe Scaldar, who had been taken in as a member of the strange gang of villains that morning.

"You are what I call a fine lot!" spoke up Rustling Nell, sneeringly. "You'd make a good penny-poppy show, you would!"

The girl had been given a chance to speak, and, being reassured by Young Wild West's calm manner, she was going to let them hear from her in great shape.

"I know who you are," retorted the captain. "You are called the Prairie Pearl. You should be called the Prairie Vixen; that would sound better."

"Oh! I guess not, Mr. Bull Head!" she answered, quickly. "I never give myself the name of the Prairie Pearl. It was a gang of half civilized Sioux Indians that did it. They were a whole lot better than you and your gang are, too. You're trying to do something and you don't know what. What a lot of fools we've all been for the last three months to be afraid of the goblins that was supposed to be hangin' around No Man's Ranch! The only slick

thing I've seen about you is the way you caught us with that net. Now, I reckon you'd better let us go, and then make tracks from here as fast as you can, if you want to get away with a whole skin. My old man will be here with a big crowd in a short time, and then it will be good-bye to No Man's Ranch! My father would go through anything for me—his fear of ghosts and goblins won't stop him a bit."

"It makes no difference how many your father brings here," replied the captain, sticking to the sepulchral tone. "We can take care of a regiment of soldiers if they should come. I am half man, half bull, and what I can't do no mortal ever dreamed of doing!"

"If you will untie my hands and feet for a couple of minutes I will give you a chance to see what you can do with me," spoke up Wild. "I'll guarantee that I will knock that bull's head off your shoulders in less than two seconds!"

"Put them in the dark room," said the captain, who was evidently undecided just what to do with the captives. "I will take time to think before we drop them to their last resting place, a mile below the surface of the earth!"

The three men picked the two up and carried them into a room that was very dark, there being no windows in it.

Then the door was closed and Young Wild West and the Prairie Pearl were left to themselves.

Though there were no windows in the room, a faint light came under the door-sill and they could see each other quite plainly.

"What are we going to do, Young Wild West?"

It was the Prairie Pearl who asked the question.

"We have got to get out of this."

"How are we going to do it?"

"I have two friends outside, you know."

At that instant Wild heard the unmistakable call of a quail.

"They are signaling now!" he exclaimed, and then he quickly answered the whistle.

"What are you whistlin' about?" cried a voice from the other side of the door. "You must feel pretty good, too."

"You never mind how I feel," answered our hero, glad that the man had not noticed the fact that he had been giving a signal to someone outside. "You were placed there to see that we don't get away. Now, just be careful that we don't."

"Don't worry about that," was the reply. "You won't never git away from No Man's Ranch, alive or dead—that's sartin!"

"If I was able I would make a bet with him on that point," Wild whispered to his fair companion.

"Then you think we are going to get out of this?" she asked, hopefully.

"Yes; but don't talk so loud. We must not let the villains hear what we are saying. I was never in a predicament yet that I did not get out of all right, and I don't mean that this shall be an exception."

"You put new life in me to hear you talk that way, Young Wild West."

"I am glad you are not one of the squeamish sort, Miss Nell."

"So am I glad of it. I'm a true girl of the prairie, and don't you forget it!"

"A regular rustler," and the boy smiled, in spite of his unpleasant position.

"You bet! But you're a regular cyclone with wings on! You can beat anything that ever straddled horseflesh, or lifted a gun! I know what I'm talkin' about when I say that. I may be a queer sort of a Prairie Pearl, but I'm Rustling Nell, just the same, and I'm glad of it. I've got a young man whom I've promised to marry as soon as he learns to ride and shoot as well as I kin. I just think the world of him, but my pride wouldn't let me have him for a husband because he wasn't up to snuff with a gun and a horse. I ain't got any use for a fellow who can't shoot the eye out of a bear or ride a bucking broncho. I was born in the West, and there ain't no other place on earth that would suit me. Can your girl ride and shoot, Young Wild West?"

"How do you know that I have a girl?"

"How do I know that you have got a girl? Why, that's easy enough! Why wouldn't a young fellow as good looking as you are have a sweetheart? You must have a girl."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I have, then," answered Wild. "Her name is Arietta Murdock, and she can shoot and ride about as well as any girl in the West."

"I bet she thinks an awful lot of you," and the girl nodded approvingly.

"I am of the opinion that she does."

"Well, I think an awful lot of my young man, too, but he's got to become the real thing before he can waltz me up before the minister."

The coolness and freedom with which the Prairie Pearl spoke made Young Wild West almost forget that they were placed in a rather perilous position.

It amused and interested him to hear her talk in that strain.

Though she spoke very plainly, he knew there was nothing but goodness in her meaning.

"What is your lover's name?" he ventured to ask.

"Percy Lennox."

"And where is he now?"

"I reckon he must be on his way to our ranch, as he was due to arrive there about tomorrow. He keeps a store down in Cheyenne, and he's making money hand-over-fist. He wrote me last week that he would show me that he could shoot as well as I can when he got here, and I'm anxious to see if he's told the truth."

"If you expect him at the ranch tomorrow we had better try and get away from here before that time."

The girl's face fell.

She had been so interested in talking that she had forgotten that she was in a bad plight.

"You said a little while ago that you was going to get us out of here," she ventured.

"Yes, I said something like that. How are your teeth, pretty sharp?"

"You can bet your boots they are!"

"Well, just see what you can do with the rope that's tied about my wrists, then. I'll move a little closer."

"My teeth are sharper than yours, I'll bet."

"I thought perhaps they were; that is why I suggested it."

"Jest let me git at that rope."

Wild soon got in the position he wanted to and then the Prairie Pearl got at work with her teeth.

It took her but a short time to chew the rope loose.

Then Young Wild West quickly untied her hands and began removing the net from them.

He felt that they were in a fair way to escape from the villains who occupied No Man's Ranch now.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ESCAPE FROM THE RANCH.

Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart had not been in the room where the empty bags were piled very long when they heard footsteps approaching the door they had entered.

They lost no time in hiding behind the bags, and just as they were crouching safely out of sight someone entered the room.

The scout had taken such a position that he could see pretty well about the room, and his eyes quickly lighted on the form of a man who was bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves.

He came over to the pile and picked up an armful of bags and then immediately left the room.

As soon as he had gone Charlie arose to his feet.

"I reckon we'd better see where Wild an' ther gal are, Jim," he said in a low tone. "Jest keep your shooters ready for use. We've got to git 'em out of here, even if some of these rascals has to go under afore we do it!"

"One of them has gone, and I guess it will be a good thing if the rest of them join him. They seem to be a pretty bad gang, as far as I can make out," answered Jim. "They meant that we should fall into that hole, and we were lucky that we did not. I never saw a worse death-trap than that."

"Nor I, either. I s'pose they've been killin' an' robbin' every stranger what come along here."

"It is quite likely. It must be a pretty shrewd villain at the head of the gang. The idea of the people at the settlement being led to believe that this ranch is the abode of ghosts and goblins! I can't see why they have not learned what was going on here and come down and set fire to the building."

"That's jest what we'll do to it when we git Wild an' ther Prairie Pearl out."

"Yes, if Wild says so."

"Oh! That's right! We must have his opinion on it,"

"Well, now if we can only find out where the villains have got them we might get them out of this house without the scoundrels knowing it."

"We'll try. We must use strategy, as Wild always says in a case of this kind."

The scout led the way out of the room into the hall.

The flooring was old and rotten and they had to be very careful in walking, so as not to make a noise.

Once in the broad, old-fashioned hall they paused and looked around them.

They could see a half-open door not far distant on the opposite side of the hall from the room they had just emerged from, and Charlie at once headed for it.

He knew it was not the one they had come from when they made their escape from the cellar.

That was enough to make him feel anxious to see what was inside it.

On his tip-toes he made his way to the door, Jim following him at a safe distance.

The next minute the scout was in such a position that he could see into the room.

One glance told him that there was a man in it.

He was seated on a chair in front of a door that opened into another room.

As he had a revolver in his hand, Charlie at once took it for granted that he was guarding the door.

Motioning for Jim Dart to remain where he was, he dropped upon his hands and knees and began crawling into the apartment where the man sat, his back turned partially toward him.

It was a daring thing for Cheyenne Charlie to do, but he felt that he must risk anything to save the life of Young Wild West, so he did not hesitate in the least.

He wanted to silence the guard without arousing the rest of the inmates of the building.

To make a sure job of it a knife would have to be used.

This he knew only too well.

Consequently his hand was on the hilt of his bowie when he started to creep in.

It so happened that the man on guard was very sleepy.

He had been up all night, and, feeling that it was impossible for the boy and girl to get out of the room, he was taking a little doze.

He did not know that Young Wild West and the Prairie Pearl had slipped the bonds and were even now trying to get out of the room by some other way than the door.

And if he had been conscious of the fact that an enemy was creeping upon him to silence him forever, he would have jumped to his feet and let out a cry of warning that could have been heard a long distance.

He was all unconscious of these facts, and that meant that his earthly career was fast coming to a close.

Cheyenne Charlie knew just where to strike.

Nearer and nearer he got to the dozing scoundrel, working his way as stealthily as a cat creeping upon an unsuspecting mouse.

The scout measured the distance carefully and then launched himself forward like a catapult.

His left hand caught the man by the throat and the knife in his right descended with a thud.

His victim gave one choking gasp and then he allowed him to drop gently to the floor.

There was a quiver and then the muscles relaxed.

One more of the murderous gang had gone before his Maker.

The door was fastened by a hasp and staple, and, pulling out a stick that held the hasp in place, Charlie opened the door.

Then it was that a smothered cry of joy escaped his lips.

Before him stood Young Wild West and the Prairie Pearl, both on the defensive!

"Oh!"

It was the girl who made the exclamation, while Wild's face broke into a smile.

"Is it you, eh, Charlie?" he whispered. "Well, I am glad you came, for I suppose we would have had a hard time getting out of here, even if we did get rid of our bonds."

"Come right on out! We ain't got a minute to spare!" answered the scout, who was so glad that he had accomplished his purpose that he felt like shouting. "Come right on! Be careful, now; there's no need of ther gang of knowin' we are tryin' to git out."

Out into the hall he led them, where they met Jim.

Then it suddenly occurred to Charlie to go back into the room and put the body of the man into the room where Wild and the girl had been confined.

He did this in short order, and then laying a couple of bags over the blood on the floor, he placed the stick back into the staple and followed his companions to the room where the pile of empty bags was.

He could hear the sounds of voices in the room adjoining the one he had given the guard his quietus in, but, luckily for them, no one came out.

The villains appeared to be busily engaged over something.

"If I thought there wasn't more'n half a dozen of 'em," he muttered, "I'd jest open that door an' begin to pour lead into 'em. But there might be twenty of 'em; an', then there's so many confounded traps around here that it wouldn't hardly be safe to do it."

When he got into the room where the window was he found Jim working at the shutter with his knife.

The wood was pretty rotten, and Dart was making great headway at it.

In less than a minute he had loosened one of the hinges so that it slipped over and hung from the top.

Then Charlie caught hold of the shutter and pushed it off.

Out leaped Jim and after him came Wild.

Then, not waiting to be assisted, the Prairie Pearl followed.

Cheyenne Charlie was so well satisfied at the outcome of the adventure that he took his time about getting out.

But once he was out, they all started to find the horses, keeping well away from the house to avoid any nets or other contrivances that might be thrown upon them.

As soon as they came in sight of the horses they started on a run for them.

While he was afraid of nothing living, Young Wild West was cautious about getting too close to that house.

But he meant to come back there again!

He was the first to reach his horse, and then it was quite easy to catch the others.

While they were in the act of mounting a shot rang out from the house and a bullet clipped a lock of hair from the head of Charlie.

Their escape had become known.

The back door was open on a crack and the barrel of a rifle was sticking out.

Crack! Crack!

Though they could not see who had fired the shot, the scout and Dart let go at the door.

They had the satisfaction of seeing the door closed, and then, leaping into the saddle, they rode off with the Prairie Pearl in the lead.

Young Wild West did not say a word till they had covered perhaps two hundred yards.

"That beats anything I ever experienced on the prairie," he observed. "A fellow is apt to find such traps in the cities, but out here on the plains!—well, it got the best of me when I found that such things existed. No Man's Ranch, eh? Well, I guess it isn't haunted by goblins, after all!"

"Not much!" exclaimed Rustling Nell. "They're a blamed sight worse than goblins, I reckon!"

"What are you goin' to do about this business, Wild?" asked the scout.

"Do about it! Why, I am going to clean that gang out just as soon as I can get hold of a brace of revolvers and a knife!" was the reply.

"That's it!" cried Jim.

"Hadn't we better burn ther buildin' down?"

"Not right away. We want to draw them out and pick them off. I would like to see through the place before it is destroyed. There's no use in denying that there's a mystery to the house, and I want to solve the mystery to the full satisfaction of the people at the settlement before the ranch is destroyed."

"Good enough!"

"It won't do to put this business off, either."

"Oh, no!"

Just then Rustling Nell threw up her hand and gave a shout of joy.

"There comes my tenderfoot cousin with dad and a whole bunch!" she cried.

CHAPTER IX.

AT DAN MANTON'S RANCH.

Little Tom Ostberg had ridden hard when he left No Man's Ranch in such a state of fright.

It was lucky the horse he rode knew the way to the ranch owned by the father of Rustling Nell, or it is doubtful if he would have reached there in some time.

But the animal headed straight for home and arrived there in quick time.

The stories the little fellow had heard about No Man's Ranch were quite enough to unnerve him, let alone what he had just seen, and when he dismounted at the stock pen and ran to his uncle, all out of breath and his face as pale as a sheet, honest Dan Manton, which was the name of the rancher, was not a little disturbed.

"Oh, uncle!" he cried; "the goblins have got Nell over at No Man's Ranch! I saw a man with a bull's head on him throw a net over her and drag her in the house!"

"Thunder!" exclaimed the ranchman. "What do you mean, boy?"

Then Tom undertook to tell all he had seen, and the father of the Prairie Pearl grew more excited every minute.

He, like the majority living in the settlement, was quite superstitious, and he had more or less of a fear of No Man's Ranch from the stories he had heard concerning the place.

But when he comprehended that his daughter had been captured and dragged into the house by a being that was half man, half bull, he forgot all about his fears, and at once hastened to organize a party to go and rescue her.

The boy calmed down wonderfully by the time the score or more of cowboys was ready to start, and he told everything that had happened that morning since he left the ranch with his fair, but reckless cousin.

It was such a straight story that the ranchman and his men were compelled to believe every word of it.

Dan Manton had heard all about Young Wild West from the girl, and that made it plain to him why she had risked paying the dreaded ranch a visit.

"She coaxed Young Wild West to let her go with him," said Tom. "He didn't ask her. He said it was nonsense about there being goblins there, and I guess she got to believe it. I know I did. Anyhow, I felt that if there was such things there he'd shoot 'em in short order. You ought to have seen how he knocked that bear over! He did it in one shot, too, and the big brute hardly moved after the bullet hit him."

The party rode hard, and though they had several miles to go, they soon came in sight of No Man's Ranch, with its dilapidated buildings and general lonesome appearance.

But just as they sighted it in the distance who should they see coming around a bunch of trees but the Prairie Pearl and three horsemen!

Rancher Dan Manton felt like leaping from the saddle and standing on his head when he saw his daughter wave her hand and heard the sound of her voice.

"Why, there she is, boys!" he shouted. "There's Nell, as sure as you're born! There's ther Prairie Pearl!"

The cowboys looked at each other, apparently more than glad that they would not have to put up a fight against any goblins.

Then they broke into a cheer that could be heard for a mile across the prairie.

One minute later they came to a halt and then up rode Rustling Nell, followed by Young Wild West, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart.

"Here I am, dad!" she cried, waving her hands. "I've had the greatest time you ever heard of!"

"Accordin' to what Tommy says, I reckon you have," answered her father, the tears starting from his eyes as he seized her by both hands and squeezed them affectionately.

"What did the little tenderfoot tell you, dad?"

"He said as how you was hauled into ther back door of ther ranch by a man with a bull's head on him."

"That's dead right, dad! That's just what happened. The man with the bull's head on him threw a kind of net over Young Wild West and me and yanked us from our horses in no time. Then we were dragged into the house and put through a course of sprouts, I kin tell you! We had an exciting time of it while we were there, but Young Wild West's two pards managed to get us out, and here we are!"

An introduction and lots of talk followed, and finally Dan Manton insisted on getting Wild to consent to go back to his ranch with them.

"I reckon tonight will be a better time for you to go to No Man's Ranch to solve ther mystery, as you say," he remarked. "You jest come back with us. I want to show you an' your pards to my wife. You beat a whole deck, includin' ther joker, you do, Young Wild West!"

"Well, I don't know about my beating the whole deck," answered our hero. "But I do know for a certainty that there are no goblins at No Man's Ranch, as some people have been foolish enough to believe. There are some very shrewd villains there, though, who have been working a murderous game on the innocents who have come that way. I am going to take it on myself to clean out this gang and learn just how they have been working things."

The men looked at him in admiration.

They were all hardy plainsmen and not afraid to fight when it became necessary, but they did not like to tackle things which they regarded as supernatural.

But there was not one among them who was not willing to go with Young Wild West to No Man's Ranch.

The fact of his having saved the life of the Prairie Pearl from the grizzly was sufficient to make them have the greatest respect for him.

When Dan Manton's ranch came in sight Wild saw that

there were several anxious people on the stoop of the house.

He could tell they were anxious by the way they were walking up and down.

They consisted of the girl's mother and her elder sisters and two or three women servants.

Rustling Nell was a favorite with them all, and the fact of her being in trouble was enough to alarm them.

But when they saw her gallop ahead of the riders there was a waving of handkerchiefs and a general rejoicing.

Though they had not heard the full story that little Tom Ostberg had told, they had an inkling of what had happened.

In spite of her reckless way, the Prairie Pearl had a very tender heart.

When she leaped from her horse and was being hugged by her mother and sisters she cried just the same as the rest of them did.

She was but a girl, with a girl's heart, after all.

The next thing in order was the introduction of Young Wild West and his partners.

Then the story of their thrilling adventure had to be told.

The women listened in amazement, while the men shook their heads and spoke to each other in whispers.

There was a stockily-built, dark-faced man, who held an important position in the ranch who did not seem to think Young Wild West was entitled to all the praise he was receiving.

His name was Bill Rinaldo, and he had just come in from the grazing grounds in time to listen to the story.

"I don't think there is anything wonderful about a young fellow who lets himself git caught nappin' like that," he remarked so our hero could hear it.

"Never mind, Bill; you're always bound to disagree with everyone else," spoke up Dan Manton.

"Well, maybe I am. But I don't see any use of laudin' a feller to ther skies when he don't deserve it. Why, I reckon I could learn him how to shoot an' ride, an' how to plug grizzlies with bullets."

Wild smiled, and as the man was looking right at him, he could not help seeing it.

"You ain't laughin' at me, are you?" he cried, his face flushing angrily.

"No, I'm not laughing," was the cool retort. "I was only smiling. Please don't get excited. I am real sorry that you could not get along without making unpleasant remarks about me."

"You are sorry, eh?"

"I just said so, didn't I?"

"Well, if you're so sorry, why don't you go away somewhere, so no one kin see you?"

"See here!" exclaimed Wild, stepping over to the fellow. "if you was the owner of this ranch I would mount my horse and ride right away without another word; but as you are only an employe, I want you to address your remarks to someone else. If you don't I will teach you a

little manners. That is a way I have, and it makes no difference where I am, either."

"Huh! Well, young feller, I don't own ther ranch, but I've got a few dollars invested in it, along with Dan Manton, so I guess I've got somethin' to say around here."

Manton's face turned red when this was said.

"It ain't necessary to let everyone know our business, Bill," he said.

"Why don't you buy my share out, then?" was the quick reply. "It will only take fifteen hundred dollars to do it."

"I would if I had ther money right at hand. I'd be only too glad to do it, too."

"Well, so long as you can't do it, I'm goin' to have somethin' to say. Now, then, you Young Wild West, you jest take a back seat. You're not wanted around here, anyway!"

"I know what's the matter with Bill Rinaldo!" cried Rustling Nell, stepping forward. "The crazy galoot is mad because I wouldn't listen to him when he made love to me. Why, I wouldn't wipe my feet on him! The poor fool thinks Young Wild West has got the inside track of him, when there's only one fellow in the world for me, and he ain't here!"

This remark so enraged Bill Rinaldo that he turned upon Wild and drew his knife.

But he did not even get a chance to use it!

Spat! Wild's fist caught him squarely in the mouth and he staggered back and fell to the ground.

The boy followed him up and kicked the knife from his hand and then stood over him waiting for him to get up.

"You are the most contemptible fellow I have met in some time for one who has been posing as an honest man," he said. "Get up and apologize for your ungentlemanly conduct to all hands, or I will thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Rinaldo let out a growl like that of a wounded bear, and staggered to his feet.

But, instead of apologizing, he seized our hero about the waist and made an effort to dash him to the ground.

But he had made the mistake of his life, for the instant he caught hold of Wild the boy's hands grasped him and his form became as rigid as a post.

When the man failed in his first attempt to throw him he strove to get a better hold, and in doing that he lost all chance of accomplishing his purpose.

Young Wild West got his left arm across the front of his neck and grasped him by the thigh with the other.

Then he began to pull and press at the same time.

This was more than Rinaldo could stand, and he tried hard to get still another hold.

Then there was a quick movement on the part of the athletic boy and up went the man's heels in the air.

Thud!

He came down upon the ground with a bang that fairly jarred him.

A rousing cheer went up from all hands, the voice of the Prairie Pearl ringing out above all the rest.

But Young Wild West paid no attention to the cheering.

He felt that it was his duty to give the man a thrashing, or else make him apologize, and when he felt that way he generally settled things to his full satisfaction.

He waited for Rinaldo to get up, watching that he did not pull a shooter, meanwhile, and when he was on his feet again he struck out with his right fist and knocked him down.

"You are going to apologize," said he, speaking as though he was not the least bit angered, though in truth, he was considerably stirred up.

"All right! I'll—I'll apologize!" called out the man in a humble and excited voice.

"Very well, then, do so!"

Bill Rinaldo got on his knees, and, facing the crowd, told them he was sorry for acting the way he had, promising them never to do so again.

When he had done this Wild turned to Dan Manton and said:

"Mr. Manton, I would like to loan you fifteen hundred dollars to buy this man's share of the ranch. I will give you a draft on the bank at Cheyenne, if he will accept it. All I want is lawful interest, and you can have the money for two years, if you like."

"I'll accept that offer!" said Manton. "Bill, will you accept Young Wild West's draft?"

"Yes!"

In a few minutes the whole thing was settled, and then Bill Rinaldo gathered up his belongings, and, mounting his horse, left the ranch.

CHAPTER X.

CAPTAIN BULL AND HIS BAND.

Bill Rinaldo had really been a pretty fair sort of a man until he fell in love with pretty Nell Manton, the Prairie Pearl.

He had been associated with her father for a long time and had watched her grow up from a child.

Her frivolous, harem-scarem nature charmed him until it asserted itself by making fun of him.

Then at last he could stand it no longer and he proposed marriage to the girl.

She had laughed at him at the start, but when he became terribly in earnest, she had given him a pretty strong lecture in her own peculiar way, the substance of which was for him to "mind his own business and not talk about such things as love, or he'd surely get into trouble."

This happened the day before the Prairie Pearl first met Young Wild West, and when Bill Rinaldo heard her speaking in such glowing terms of the young deadshot he hated Young Wild West before he had seen him.

It can be readily imagined what frame of mind the man was in when he mounted his horse to leave the ranch he had so long been a part owner in.

He rode on in the direction of Markdown, intending to go there and stop for a day or so.

When about halfway there he met a horseman whom he knew quite well.

It was no other than Lank Forbes, the bully—the fellow Wild had given such a rough handling in front of the supply store at the settlement.

"Hello, Bill!" called out Forbes. "What's ther matter with you? I never see you look so downhearted afore."

"Mebbe I've got reason to be downhearted," was the reply. "What's ther matter with you; I see your face is putty well bruised up?"

"Oh! A boy named Young Wild West done that to me yesterday. I'm around lookin' fur him now. I want to git a chance at him, an' if I do I'll bet he won't wallop me, or anybody else ag'in!"

"A feller named Young Wild West done it, did you say?" gasped Rinaldo. "Why, Lank! he's ther very one what fixed me up jest a little while ago at Manton's Ranch."

"You don't mean it!"

"It's a fact."

"Young Wild West is a regular wonder when it comes to handlin' a man, ain't he?"

"Ther greatest I ever seen!"

The spark of sympathy being ignited, the two got on the best of terms.

They talked away for half an hour, and at the expiration of that time they had come to the conclusion that they both wanted revenge on Young Wild West, and that they would not be satisfied till they got it.

Neither spoke outright of killing him, but it was the purpose of both to do it if they could.

When Forbes heard what Young Wild West had been doing since he left the settlement that morning he opened wide his eyes.

"Then there ain't no spooks around No Man's Ranch?" questioned the bully.

"No," was the reply. "There's a bad gang there what's playin' tricks an' robbin' people what come along, I guess."

"Do you think that is a fact?"

"I feel quite sure of it."

"Wouldn't it be great if we could go an' git in with them fellers at No Man's Ranch? You say Young Wild West intends to go there tonight to clean 'em out—wouldn't they be glad to know that, so they could be on the lookout?"

"By jove!" exclaimed Bill Rinaldo, delightedly. "Do you think it could be done, Lank?"

"We kin try, anyhow."

"Yes, but we don't want to venture too close to ther blamed old house, either."

"We'll ride up near enough for them to see us, an' then

we'll hoist up a handkerchief. I kin put it on ther end of my rifle barrel."

"All right! Let's git over there right away, then. It's putty near noon, an' it may be that we kin strike some grub over there."

The two rascals struck out on a bee-line for No Man's Ranch.

The feeling for revenge was leading them on, and it was safe to say that they were bound to become first-class villains, even if they had not decided to go over to the ranch that had a mystery hanging over it.

They rode to within one hundred yards of the house after reaching the ranch property, and then they came to a halt.

Lank Forbes produced a handkerchief that was not as white as it might have been, and fastened it to the muzzle of the short carbine he carried.

Then he held it up and waved it back and forth several times.

At first there was no notice taken of it, but after awhile they saw a man approaching on horseback, who had evidently left the house from the back and rode around into view.

"Hello, stranger!" called out Forbes. "Is there a chance for us to git anything to eat in ther ranch?"

"I guess not," was the evasive reply. "I don't think there is anyone living there."

"There must be, accordin' to what we heard a little while ago."

"What did you hear?"

"We heard that you had four people in here, an' that they all got away an' killed two of your men for you. The young feller with the long hair is comin' back here to-night to clean you out, too."

"I don't know what you are talkin' about," said the man, uneasily. "I am a stranger in these parts. I just rode up to that house and tried to get in, but it is entirely empty, as far as a human being is concerned. I can't make out what you are talking about."

"I guess you know all right," spoke up Bill Rinaldo. "S'pose we tell you that we are after Young Wild West, an' that we are bound to git square with him for somethin' he done to us—what then?"

"Who is Young Wild West?" asked the man.

"Ther young feller what was with ther gal when you collared 'em an' put 'em in a dark room."

The man looked at him sharply when he said this.

"See here, my friend," said he, suddenly. "are you afraid to die?"

"Afraid to die!" echoed the two villains in a breath.

"Yes, afraid to die."

"I don't know what you mean," faltered Bill Rinaldo.

"I spoke it plain enough, didn't I?"

"Well, yes."

"Then answer the question."

"Well, I s'pose I am afraid to die."

"Come on with me, then. If you had said no I would have let you go on about your business."

The rascals looked at each other.

"Are you goin' to take us inside ther ranch?" questioned Lank Forbes.

"Yes, come on!"

They shrugged their shoulders and hesitated.

"You are not afraid to go in there, are you?"

"Not as your friends we ain't."

"Well, you are going in as my friends."

"You mean that?"

"I certainly do. If I had not concluded that you were just the kind of men I wanted I should not have invited you in the ranch. Come on, now!"

He turned his horse and they followed almost mechanically.

Straight for the front of the house they rode, and when they were right at the low stoop the big door suddenly opened.

Into the building rode the leader.

"Come on!" he cried. "Don't hesitate now, for he who hesitates is lost."

Pretty badly scared, the two rascals rode through the doorway, ducking their heads to prevent them from being hit by the top of the frame as they did so.

Then the door slammed shut and three men suddenly appeared.

"Here are two fellows who have come over to tell us that a raid is to be made on us tonight, boys!" exclaimed the man who had conducted them there.

He was no other than the leader of the mysterious gang that inhabited the ranch—the half man, half bull.

He went by the name of Captain Bull and he was a sort of fanatic on things that were weird and mysterious.

About three months before he had taken possession of the ranch, finding an old hag living there alone, who admitted that she had been frightening people away by giving them the impression that the ranch was haunted.

Captain Bull saw a chance to make money by killing and plundering the unsuspecting ones who came that way, and to frighten others who might interfere with him away.

He had started right in to perfect his arrangements.

He had been the means of murdering four or five travelers, and now he was just desperate enough to stay there and fight against a regiment, if it came to the point.

Of the fiendish contrivances he had rigged in and about the house we will tell of later on.

"Strangers," said the captain, looking Forbes and Rinaldo squarely in the eyes and speaking in a sepulchral voice, "are you aware that no honest man who comes to this ranch ever goes away from it, dead or alive?"

They made no answer.

"If you have come here for the purpose of learning what is here and go back to those on Manton's ranch and report it, you have made a big mistake."

"Oh! we didn't do that. Let me tell my story, won't you?"

Rinaldo was so earnest when he said this that Captain Bull told him to go ahead.

He told it all, even to the part where he had fallen in love with the Prairie Pearl, and the captain and his three men listened attentively.

They believed the story, too.

Then Lank Forbes told what he had against Young Wild West.

"I was ther boss of ther settlement afore he come there," he concluded. "Now, there ain't no use of me stayin' around there any more, 'cause they ain't afraid of me, like they was."

"Well, do you want to join in with us and kill those who are coming here to clean us out tonight?"

"Yes!" they answered, unhesitatingly.

They did not dare to answer no, for fear they would be put out of the way instantly.

"Good! Prepare them to take the oath, men!"

The horses were led to the further end of the building, where there was nothing but a floor of clay and where there were more steeds stabled, and then Forbes and Rinaldo were securely blindfolded.

The ranch building was a large one and contained many rooms.

Into one of the larger ones the two candidates were conducted.

They were kept here in silence for perhaps fifteen minutes.

Then they heard the steady tramp of feet around them and the hoodwinks were removed from their eyes.

The rascals found themselves standing in about the center of the room.

In a semi-circle before them were five peculiar looking figures.

Four of them wore bags over their heads, the same as has already been described, and the fifth was the captain with the bull's head on.

The room was a dark one situated somewhere in the center of the building and a lantern had been lighted and suspended from the ceiling.

Neither of the candidates possessed any overplus of nerve, and as they looked around at the strange picture, they felt not exactly comfortable.

"Your names, strangers!" said the captain in a slow, measured tone of voice.

"Lank Forbes."

"Bill Rinaldo."

"Your ages."

"Forty-one."

"Fifty-three."

"You wish to join the band of Captain Bull?"

"Yes."

"Then hold upo your hands and repeat after me an obligation that will hold you to me so long as you shall live."

Then followed an oath that was long and fearful in the wording.

The two rascals managed to repeat it to the satisfaction of Captain Bull, however, and then they were declared members of the band.

When this was done they were shown over the building from cellar to garret, and many were the things they saw that made them open their eyes.

But when they were told that if their enemies were put out of the way there would be lots of money to be made, they felt glad that they had come to the ranch and joined the band.

CHAPTER XI.

SOME SPORT INDULGED IN.

Dan Manton, the ranchman, was so elated at having got rid of his partner that he decided to hold a celebration in honor of the event.

"I will be able to pay you back your money inside of a year," he said to Young Wild West. "I have been thinking of borrowing the money for some time, but had no idea he would sell out as cheap as that. I am awful glad we've got rid of Rinaldo, for I never did think he was honest."

"Well, I am not afraid to trust you for a moment," our hero answered. "I think I can tell what sort of a man you are. I only needed to take a good look at you. Just rest easy on the paying-off part and work your ranch to the best advantage."

"I will. But say, Young Wild West."

"What is it, sir?"

"I'm goin' to git ther fiddler out an' we'll have a regular cowboy dance."

"Go ahead."

"An' after that we will have a dinner of roast pork. I've got a shoat restin' in ther big stone oven now."

"That will be fine."

"You bet it will! An' plenty of good applesass to go with it, an' ther bread that my wife an' darters make! I reckon you'll enjoy it all right."

Wild concluded he would, when he came to think of it.

Manton started right in to get the fun going.

One of the cowboys had a violin and knew how to play it pretty well.

The rest of the men who were not doing duty just then hastened to get on their best rigs, for they knew what was coming.

There was going to be a hot time, and they knew there would be plenty of corn whisky in evidence, for Manton was a drinking man, though he seldom took more than he wanted.

A cowboy who does not like whisky is a rare article, and though the habit is no doubt a bad one, it would be hard to make him believe it.

Our three friends made themselves right at home.

The women at the ranch used them like lords.

When the fiddle struck up the Prairie Pearl, who had donned a regular hunting costume, leaped on the back of her horse and began putting the animal through all sorts of manoeuvres.

She had the horse trained and she certainly did some wonderful tricks.

"Kin your horse waltz, Young Wild West?" she called out when she had tired of doing the tricks.

"Yes," answered Wild. "He can do almost anything that any horse can do."

"Well, whoop her up, then, and be my partner for a waltz! I'm a hair-pin that can't be bent when it comes to waltzin' on horseback! If you don't know the game I'll soon show you."

Wild needed no second invitation.

When there was any fun going on he liked to have a hand in it.

He was soon on the back of the handsome sorrel, and then he showed Rustling Nell that she was not the only one who knew how to waltz.

Away went the mounted couple to the strains of the "Blue Danube" that the fiddler managed to turn out in pretty good shape.

They had not made more than half a dozen turns when the lookers-on were applauding loudly.

It was the first time the Prairie Pearl had met a partner who could do the dance with her.

For nearly ten minutes they kept it up, the horses going through the evolutions without a single break.

When they came to a stop Dan Manton threw his hat in the air and sat down on the grass completely exhausted from the vociferous applause he had been giving.

"It beats anything I ever seen," he panted. "Ain't Young Wild West a wonder, though? Fetch out ther hard cider an' ther corn juice whisky; I'm dry after seein' that."

Then the jollification began in earnest.

It was just about this time that a horseman was discovered approaching the house.

He was riding along at an easy canter, and when Rustling Nell caught sight of him she uttered a loud whoop and galloped out to meet him.

Our friends watched her, and when she reined up her steed at the side of the newcomer, who was a young man of prepossessing appearance, she grabbed him about the neck and gave him a rousing kiss.

"That's her lover, I'll bet!" said Wild to Charlie and Jim. "She was telling me about him. She said she had promised to marry him as soon as he learned to ride and shoot as well as she can."

"He seems to ride that horse putty well," retorted the scout. "I don't think he kin ride with her, though, for she is a regular whip at ther game."

The next minute the young couple came riding up to where the celebration was taking place.

"Hooray!" cried the Prairie Pearl at the top of her voice. "This is Percy Lennox right from Cheyenne! Ain't he a beauty, boys?"

Then she gave him another smack, which the young fellow did not seem to mind in the least.

It was evident that he was used to her rough-and-ready ways.

Manton and his wife and remaining daughters at once hastened to greet the visitor.

They were very glad to see him.

When his hand had been nearly shaken from his wrist by the welcome he received, Rustling Nell faced him toward our three friends and said:

"Percy, this is Young Wild West an' his pards, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart. They're good-looking fellows, ain't they? If it wasn't that I thought so much of you, an' that Young Wild West has a sweetheart home in the Black Hills, I believe I'd have tumbled head-over-heels in love with him. But you're the only man for me, Percy, even if you are a nickel-plated tenderfoot! Shake hands, gents!"

They did shake hands then, and our friends were very favorably impressed with the young merchant from Cheyenne.

Then little Tom Ostberg stepped up.

"I'm glad to meet you, Percy," he said, familiarly. "I've heard Nell talk so much about you that I seem to have known you for a long while. You are all right. Can you shoot as good as Nell yet?"

"I have an idea that I can," was the reply. "I am willing to give her a trial any time she is ready."

"Do it right now, then!" exclaimed Dan Manton, who had taken a couple of stiff horns and was in the right humor for more sport. "Do it right now."

"All right!" cried his reckless daughter. "We'll shoot ther match right now, and Young Wild West shall be ther referee."

This was satisfactory to everyone, so when the young man had dismounted and treated himself to a good washing to get rid of the dust of travel, he came out, rifle in hand.

Wild soon made a target from a piece of board, and, riding off to a distance of two hundred yards, he stuck it in the ground so it could be readily seen.

"Go ahead an' shoot, Percy," said Rustling Nell.

"You first," was the reply. "I am to shoot as well as you do, you know."

"Oh! All right, then! Here goes!"

She toed the scratch and raised her rifle to her shoulder. Crack!

"An inch from ther bull's-eye!" came from the cowboy who was in attendance.

Again she fired.

"A trifle nearer," was the report this time.

She was only to shoot three times, so she nerved herself to hit the bull's-eye when the rifle went to her shoulder for the last shot.

"Jest teched ther edge of ther bull's-eye!" yelled the cowboy, swinging his hat in the air. "I reckon that can't be beat much."

Percy Lennox stepped up with a smile of confidence.

"I'd hate to beat you, Nell," he said.

"Go ahead! If you do you kin have me for your bride as soon as I kin git my weddin' outfit made."

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean it, of course."

"Well, if I beat you I shall hold you to that."

"Go ahead, I say!"

The young man took careful aim and scored a bull's-eye the first shot.

"How do you feel now, Nell?" he asked, tantalizingly.

"Bully! Go ahead again!"

Crack!

Once more Percy fired.

"Another bull's-eye—a dead center!" called out the man in attendance.

All eyes were turned upon the Prairie Pearl now.

But she seemed delighted rather than discomfited.

"Go ahead and shoot again," she said, calmly.

Percy did so and hit the bull's-eye on the edge.

"Ther nickel-plated tenderfoot wins, I reckon!" cried Cheyenne Charlie.

"Yes," spoke up Young Wild West, "I must award the match to Mr. Percy Lennox, of Cheyenne."

"Percy," said Nell, walking up to him, "if you hadn't beat me I would have been ashamed of you. I did my best, too."

"Then you are satisfied and will keep your word?"

"Of course I will! Did anyone ever hear of Rustling Nell going back on her word?"

She turned to the cowboys as she asked this question.

"No—no!" came the answer in a chorus.

The couple walked away, and as soon as they could get clear of the crowd went into the house.

The cowboy who had been attending to the target rode in with the remark that he didn't believe there was anyone on the grounds who could beat the score made by Percy.

This started an argument right away, and soon half a dozen wanted to show how well they could shoot.

In five minutes more they were betting their money on the result.

Wild good-naturedly acted as judge for them, and the result was that the man who had been the first to start the argument proved to be the best shot among them.

He was much elated, and when he had imbibed a couple of drinks from the big demijohn that sat on the grass he walked over to Wild and challenged him to shoot.

"I don't feel exactly in the humor," he answered, with a smile. "Try my partners. Either of them can beat you, I think."

"What!" cried the cowboy. "You don't think that, do you?"

"Yes, I think either Charlie or Jim can beat your score."

"I'll bet fifty dollars either one of 'em can't."

"Just keep your money in your pocket. I don't want to bet you. But they will show you, just the same. You will see how foolish you were to offer to bet, then."

Charlie and Jim raised no objections whatever, and when they had both shot it was found that they beat the man's score easily.

He was a very surprised man, for he was really quite a good shot.

But both Charlie and Jim were above the average in shooting.

"You fellers are all right," said the cowboy. "I never squeal when I gits downed. I s'pose you kin beat their shots, eh, Young Wild West?"

"I might," answered our hero, with a smile. "But I won't shoot at the target and I won't use a rifle just now. I will show you something with a revolver. Have you got a silver dollar in your clothes?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Produce it."

The man did so.

"Now," said Wild, drawing his revolver, "just throw the dollars straight up as high as you can."

"Say when you're ready."

"Now!"

Up went the silver coin spinning around in the rays of the noonday sun and shining brightly.

As it started to descend after reaching its height Wild's revolver cracked.

Up went the dollar fully ten feet higher.

Crack!

Again he hit it, sending it up again.

Then when it was halfway to the ground he fired once more.

The bullet struck it squarely and it went up straight in the air.

The boy did not fire again, but deftly caught the coin in his hand when it came down.

"There you are!" he said, as he handed it over to the owner. "There are three bullet marks on it—two on the face and one on the milled edge."

The cowboys were electrified with excitement.

Never had they seen such wonderful shooting before.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Young Wild West was admired by everyone of the cowboys after the wonderful shooting he had done.

Not that they had not the greatest respect for him before, but now they thought he was something out of the ordinary.

They wanted him to shoot with the rifle, but he declined to do so, and after awhile, when dinner was ready, he got a chance to leave them.

It was certainly a tempting meal that the wife and daughters of the ranchman had prepared.

The afternoon was nearly half gone when our friends got up from the table.

Then, while the cowboys made merry outside, they took things easy to give the food a chance to digest.

Just before dark Wild picked out six men to accompany them to No Man's Ranch.

When they were ready to start the Prairie Pearl came out with her horse, accompanied by Percy Lennox.

"We're going along, too, Young Wild West," she said, quietly. "We want to get a shot at that man with the bull's head."

Knowing her as well as he did, our hero did not try to persuade her to stay home.

He was certain that he would simply be wasting words. She would go, anyway.

It was her nature to do as she pleased.

So when they rode off she was riding well in the front, her lover by her side.

Wild had not formed any plan of action yet.

He thought it advisable to depend upon circumstances, to a certain extent.

It was a moonlight night, and in the crisp November air it was quite pleasant to ride.

In due time they came in sight of No Man's Ranch.

Cheyenne Charlie now made a suggestion.

"Let us go over to ther shed over there," he said. "When me an' Jim struck there yesterday we found ther fresh prints of a horse's hoofs. It might do to look there now."

"All right," answered Wild. "We will go there first."

In a minute or so they had rounded the big barn and reached the shed near the broken cattle pen.

Just then a blinding light flashed in front of them, and the next instant the head and horns of a bull appeared in front of Young Wild West.

Acting on a sudden impulse, our hero grabbed his lariat and let the coils go at the object.

The result was all that could be wished for.

The lariat became entangled about the object, and then Wild quickly jerked it from its feet.

Charlie and Jim were out of the saddle instantly.

They sprang upon the struggling form and soon had it in their power.

"Drag him from beneath the shed," said Wild, and they promptly did so.

"I reckon we've got one of ther measly coyotes, anyhow!" exclaimed the scout, in a tone of triumph.

"Yes, and the head one, if I am not mistaken."

Wild did not say a word until the man, who was no other than Captain Bull, had been dragged fully fifty yards away from the shed.

Then he dismounted.

Walking up to the hideous-looking form, he seized the horns of the bull's head and tore it off.

The pale face of a man was disclosed.

"Don't kill me!" he pleaded. "I'll give up. My scheme did not work this time. Don't kill me."

"There is only one thing that you can do to save your life for a little while," answered Wild, coolly gazing at him.

"What is that?"

This was asked eagerly.

"Lead us to the door of the house and order your men to come out and give themselves up."

"I will do that, but I don't believe they will give in without a fight."

"If they refuse to surrender we will burn the house and shoot them as they come out."

The captain thought a moment.

He had lost all the wonderful nerve he had possessed when he took in the two new members that day.

When he had the upper hand he was as bold as a lion, but when he was in the power of his enemies he was like a frightened jackal.

He knew that a rope would be apt to be put around his neck.

He cast his eyes in the direction of the shed where he had been captured.

Our hero noticed this, and he called on Jim Dart to follow him there.

The two rode over.

Jim struck a match as they dismounted, and then almost the first thing they saw was a big opening in the ground in a corner right where the leader of the villainous gang had been captured.

"Ah!" exclaimed Wild; "that explains one of the mysteries. There is a passage leading to the house from here."

Jim alighted another match and then shook his head in the affirmative.

"You are right," he answered. "It looks to me as though a trench has been dug, and then covered with boards and dirt. It is fully a hundred yards to the house, and it must have taken them some little time to do it."

"Well, just call some of the men over here and you guard this place with them. It may be that the villains might attempt to come out this way."

Jim did as he was told.

Then Wild rode back, and, selecting Charlie to accompany him, made for the front door of the house.

He called out for two of the men to bring the prisoner along.

When they got him there our hero turned to him and said:

"Call upon your men to surrender, or you will be hanged to the nearest tree in double-quick time!"

Captain Bull at once shouted:

"It's all up, boys! They have got me, so you may as well give in."

There was no answer.

Wild jumped down from his horse.

"See here!" he exclaimed, taking the prisoner by the collar. "Is there any danger if we open that door, other than the bullets that might be sent at us?"

"No!" was the trembling answer; "not from this side."

"You are certain of that?"

"Yes, I am telling you the truth."

"Stand up here!"

Charlie lifted him to his feet.

"Burst in that door, boys!"

A couple of the cowboys soon found a piece of timber and they used it as a battering-ram against the door.

As strong as it was, it could not withstand such treatment, and it soon gave way with a crash.

Almost at the same instant the sound of shooting came from the shed.

Then a yell went up from the cowboys.

"They have tried to get out that way," said Wild, a grim smile playing about his lips. "Well, I guess we have worked things out pretty easily after all."

Just then they saw a light coming toward them.

It was a lantern in the hands of an old woman, as they soon made out.

"Don't kill me!" she pleaded. "I ain't done nothin' wrong."

She was quickly seized and bound.

They did not intend to allow anyone to make their escape from the ranch.

"Are there any men in the house?" Wild demanded of her.

"No, sir," she answered; "they have all gone out, sir."

"Which way did they go?"

"Through the passage to the shed, sir."

Wild did not know whether to believe her or not.

After a moment's thought he decided to stay there till daylight.

Then he would make a thorough investigation of the premises.

He had no sooner come to this conclusion than he gave the word to the rest.

Jim Dart soon came over.

"We have got them all, I guess," he said. "There is only six of them, all told. Two of them we have met before, too."

"Who are they, Jim?"

"Lank Forbes, the bully you thrashed, and Bill Rinaldo, the man who sold out to Dan Manton this morning."

"The dickens you say!"

"Go over there and have a talk with them."

"I will."

He went over to the shed and found it just as Dart had said.

Both Forbes and Rinaldo were only too glad to make a clean breast of all they knew about No Man's Ranch.

When he had heard their stories, told separately and not within hearing of each other, he changed his mind about remaining there all night.

As Manton's ranch was the nearest place to them, he decided to take the prisoners over there, and then come back in the morning and examine the premises.

Half an hour later they were on their way to Manton's, the Prairie Pearl and Percy Lennox leading the way.

Somehow the girl had lost considerable of her reckless manner since her lover had beat her shooting.

"I know what's ther matter," said Cheyenne Charlie, with a chuckle, "she's in love."

This might have been the case.

The next morning Young Wild West led a whole crowd over to No Man's Ranch, taking Captain Bull with them.

The villain confessed all, and even showed them the workings of the traps he had constructed.

The throwing of the silk net was easily explained when it was found that it had some lead balls attached to it to force it through the air when it was once propelled forward.

The trap-door in the floor of the hall near the rear door was nothing wonderful, since all a man had to do was to pull a rope and let it down when there was any weight upon it.

The trench which had been dug from the cellar of the house to the shed and covered with boards and earth was probably about the best contrivance of all.

It gave the ingenious villain an opportunity to make mysterious things occur in the shed and frighten people who happened to come there; while, at the same time, it gave them another way of getting in and out of the house.

The brilliant flashes of light that had been seen was caused by common fireworks.

With this explanation the mystery of No Man's Ranch was not such a deep one after all.

There is but little more to add to our story.

The prisoners were taken to Markdown after the ranch had been searched and bodies found in the deep pit in the cellar.

Judge Lynch promptly took them in hand and they were hanged to the big tree in front of the supply store.

Then Wild led a crowd over to No Man's Ranch and it was set on fire and burned to the ground.

The next morning while our friends were in the hotel at the settlement telling the proprietor just how they had solved the mystery of No Man's Ranch, Dan Manton, the ranchman, came in.

"Young Wild West," said he, "I want to ask your advice on somethin'."

"What is it?"

"Do you think my gal Nell is old enough to git married?"

"Yes, if she is inclined that way," he unhesitatingly answered.

"That's right, Young Wild West!" came from the outside, where the girl was listening. "I knew you would say that. I reckon you think I'm pretty well able to take care of myself, don't you?"

"Oh, yes! So long as there are no bears around you are all right, Prairie Pearl."

Everybody expected the girl to answer, but she did not.

When the Prairie Pearl quit having her say that wound things up. Soon afterward Wild and his friends went on to Cheyenne and transacted the business they had in view.

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST ON A CROOKED TRAIL; OR, LOST ON THE ALKALI DESERT," which will be the next number (55) of "Wild West Weekly."

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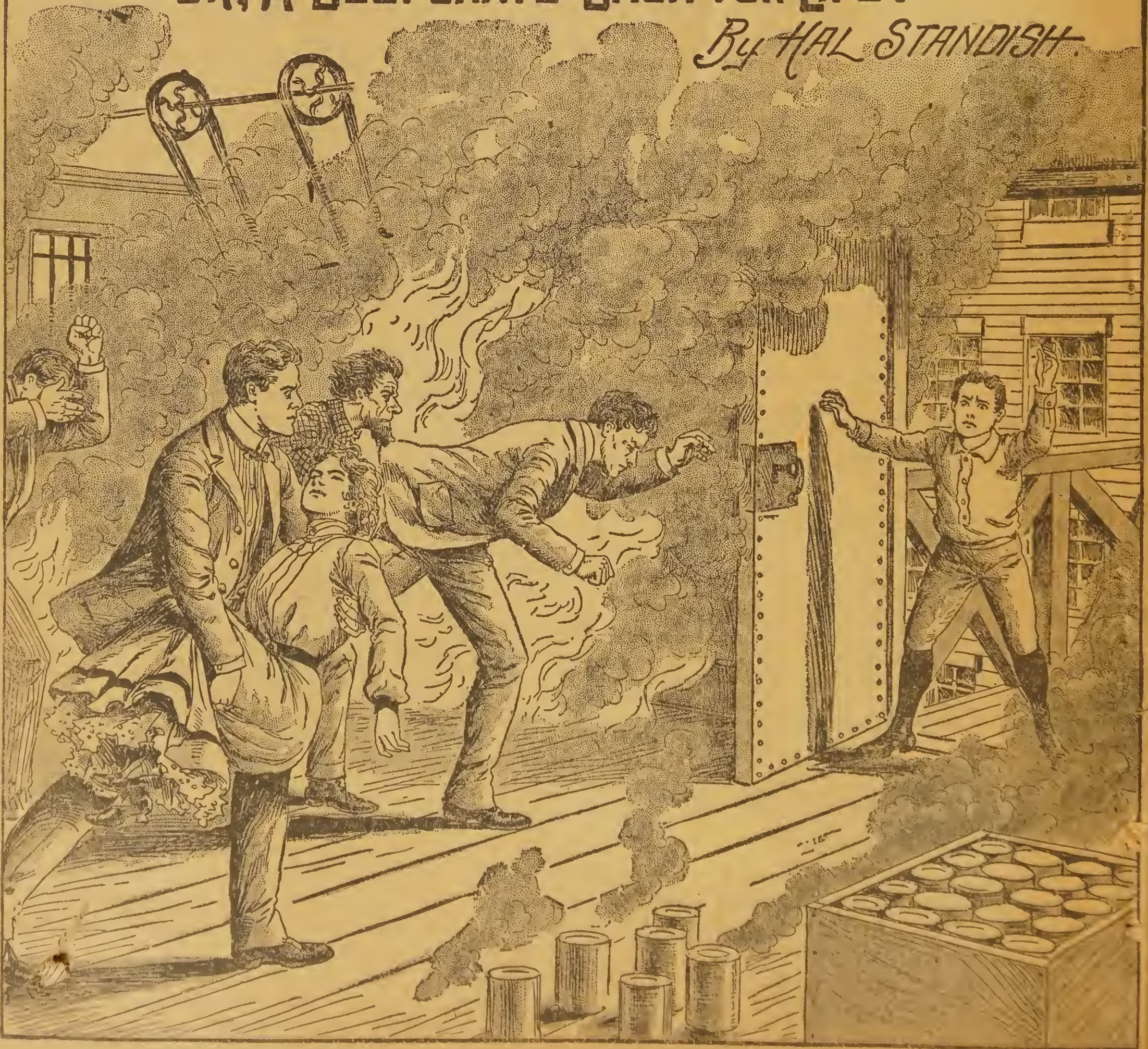
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